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THIRD Loop:

THE NAMELESS PRINCESS AND THE CRUEL EMPEROR

3



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Third Loop: The Nameless Princess and the Cruel Emperor Volume 3

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Third Loop: The Nameless Princess and the Cruel Emperor Volume 3

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Chapter 1: Angelina and the Dagger of Mercy

SPRING mist shrouded the sky over the Purple Forbidden Palace, and a golden line sparkled in the haze. All the while, the still immature song of a bush warbler filled the air.

“Seems the Golden Dragon is making another appearance today,” the brown-haired knight said.

“It’s Her Highness’s birthday, after all,” the gray-haired knight answered with a bemused smile.

The brown-haired knight laughed. “The Golden Dragon certainly is overprotective of Princess Angelina,” he said, disregarding his own overprotectiveness.

“He is, indeed. Still, I never expected to see the legendary guardian deity of the imperial family with my own eyes.”

The two knights looked up at the misty sky together while sharing a laugh.



“**LINA, LINA!**” Ryuho called. “Hurry up!”

A red-haired boy pulled the pink-haired girl’s hand. As Angelina’s buoyant hair swayed in the wind, her smile lit up her azure eyes, the depths of which shone with a rainbow luster. The mere sight of her dyed the entire world in spring colors.

The girl’s full name was Angelina Xin Lei. Only those in line for imperial succession could introduce themselves with that last name. The golden Inverted Scale sparkling behind her ear further proved that she belonged to the imperial family. Normally, the emperor’s children underwent the Naming Trial at the age of five. Only those who passed were recognized as members of the imperial family. However, Angelina had passed the Naming Trial at the age of three and received the Inverted Scale. Thus, she was the true Imperial Princess of the

Jinlongian Empire.

That said, Angelina had a secret. For some reason, she'd experienced multiple time loops. After overcoming three untimely deaths, she was now living her fourth life.

A small, gold dragon had wrapped itself around Angelina's arm. The creature was the guardian deity of the Jinlongian royal family. Among the members of the royal family, the Golden Dragon loved Angelina in particular.

"Your ears are popping out, Ryuho," Angelina noted.

Round tiger ears had sprouted from Ryuho's red hair. Immediately, he tried to press them down.

Ryuho Ruo was a prince of Nanran—a southern vassal nation of Jinlong. His red hair bounced about freely like burning flames. Likewise, his eyes were a rare combination of crimson and gold. His tanned skin gave off an air of wildness, and he was three years older than Angelina.

Flame Tigers were the holy beasts of Ryuho's homeland. Since Ryuho had inherited strong Flame Tiger blood, he spent a great deal of time in feline form. Lately, he'd grown accustomed to controlling his transformations. As a result, he could now maintain a human form for long periods. Even so, his orange tiger ears would pop out whenever he felt happy, as had just occurred.

"Guh!" Ryuho strained, trying to force down his ears. Unfortunately, they refused to budge. "*Think you can get rid of us that easily?!*" they seemed to jeer. "Grr!" Ryuho growled, prickling with irritation. "Dang it! Why won't they go back down?!"

Today was Angelina's birthday. Her small celebration would only include close friends and family. As the host, Emperor Feilong had ordered Ryuho to participate as a human. Feilong had a nasty habit of harassing Ryuho due to his close friendship with Angelina. Nevertheless, they couldn't defy the emperor.

"What should I do...?" Ryuho asked, pressing down on his ears with all his might. The more he panicked, the more powerfully his ears rebounded. "Feilong is going to make fun of me again! *Liiina...*"

Angelina's heart skipped a beat as tears filled Ryuho's eyes. Meanwhile, the

Golden Dragon chuckled from his coil around her arm.

“Can you lower your head a bit, Ryuho?” Angelina asked.

When Ryuho did, Angelina placed her small hands on his tiger ears, rubbing them gently. Ryuho narrowed his eyes blissfully, a deep purr rumbling in the back of his throat.

“Do you mind hiding yourselves a bit, tiger ears?” Angelina asked. “I don’t want Fodder being nasty to Ryuho.” With that, Ryuho’s ears shrank down without a sound. Angelina ruffled his red hair to confirm their disappearance. “Yep, they’re gone!” she cheered.

“You’re right!” Ryuho exclaimed. “They disappeared! You’re amazing, Lina!” Positively beaming, he hugged Angelina and pressed his cheek against hers. “Thank you!”

Overcome with happiness, Angelina let out an embarrassed giggle. “You’re oh so very welcome!”

The two children left their room while holding hands, heading towards the dining room. Today was Angelina’s fifth birthday. Though Feilong had wanted to throw a lavish party, Angelina had refused. She wanted to spend her birthday with the people she was truly close to—those with whom she could be vulnerable. In her past lives, Angelina had never spent her birthdays surrounded by family. The company of loved ones was a greater blessing than any party, no matter how magnificent.



BOTH Marfa and the old knight had been invited to the dining room. Marfa was Angelina’s former wet nurse. Originally, she’d been the empress’s handmaid. After serving as Kyril’s wet nurse, she lived in the Big Dipper Garden with Angelina. During Angelina’s life of persecution in the storage shed, both Marfa and the old knight loved her with all their hearts. Normally, neither of them would be able to dine with the emperor. Yet, Feilong had broken tradition to make his beloved daughter happy on this occasion.

Angelina’s older brother—Crown Prince Kyril—had already taken his seat at the table. While his hair shared the same buoyancy as Angelina’s, it shone with

a silver sparkle. He'd inherited his pale blue eyes from their father, which also glittered with a rainbow luster. Now thirteen, his features had taken on a more dignified air.

Emperor Feilong of Jinlong was a gorgeous man. His long, silver hair shone like moonlight, and his gaze was as cold as ice. A sword hung from his hip even during his daughter's birthday party. What's more, a dirty cloth was fastened to the handle. Angelina had given him that protective amulet.

Being in the presence of the notoriously cruel emperor filled Marfa and the knight with dread. Yet when Angelina ran over to the pair, they couldn't help but smile.

Angelina spread out her arms in front of the old knight. "Marfa, Mishter Knight!"

As always, the old knight picked up Angelina and spun her around once. "You're getting big," he said with a smile.

Angelina grinned in response.

Feilong's chest prickled with envy as he watched Angelina treat Marfa and the knight as grandparents. She behaved more like a spoiled child around the old knight than him. Feilong had committed a grave error in exiling Angelina to the Big Dipper Garden when she was young. That decision tormented him even now.

When will Lina open up to me? Feilong wondered, trying to hide the sigh that spilled from his lips. When he lifted his head, he donned a resolute expression befitting the emperor and looked around the vast space. "Today is Angelina's birthday," he announced, his sharp tone echoing throughout the dining room. "Take your seats."

In a single moment, the air in the room grew chilly.

Feilong pointed to the center of three chairs lined up at the head of the table. "This is your seat, Lina."

When Angelina headed towards the seat, Feilong pulled out the chair himself and sat her on top of it. As Feilong nodded in satisfaction, the Golden Dragon moved from Angelina's arm to the chair's backrest.

One of the seats beside Angelina was empty, a bundle of cloth sitting atop it. “Who is this seat for?” she asked.

“Phaenna,” Feilong answered.

Angelina’s expression darkened. Phaenna was her biological mother. Sadly, Phaenna had died after giving birth to her. As such, Angelina’s birthday was also the anniversary of her mother’s death.

Upon seeing Angelina’s downcast expression, Feilong provided a hasty clarification. “I just thought that, surely, Phaenna would want to celebrate with us too.”

“I’m certain Mother is delighted as well,” Kyril added.

Angelina lifted her head. At the same time, Marfa and the old knight looked at the small princess and nodded gently.

Angelina had never expected this day to come. Her mother had died after giving birth to her. Those who loved Phaenna should have been mourning her today. *I shouldn’t wish for people to celebrate my birthday*, Angelina had always thought. She’d even felt guilty when Feilong had suggested throwing her a party.

But I was wrong, she thought. We can celebrate my birthday and remember Mother at the same time.

Swelling with happiness, Angelina nodded enthusiastically. “...Okay!”

A lavish spread of food covered the entire table. There were steaming bowls of dim sum, bear paws, shark fins, swallow nests, elephant trunks, and other magnificent delicacies to choose from.

“This is a gift from me,” Marfa said, placing a cake in front of Angelina.

Cakes were a rare treat in Jinlong. They originated from Yule—the homeland of Empress Phaenna. Yule had collapsed during Phaenna’s youth, and people who remembered its culture had grown few in number. Fortunately, Marfa was one of those few who could pass on Yule’s culture to future generations.

Upon seeing the cake, Angelina sighed in admiration. As a delicacy baked in the palace, it boasted an abundance of fresh fruit.

"I had plenty of fresh strawberries placed on the top," Marfa said. "I know how much you love them, after all."

Angelina's face split into a wide grin. "I love you so much, Marfa!"

"I love you too, Princess. Well then, shall we cut the cake?"

Marfa began cutting and distributing the cake. Of course, she placed a piece in front of Phaenna's seat as well. After watching the entire process, Feilong urged Marfa to sit down again. Thus, everyone was seated around the table like a family. When the Golden Dragon stretched his neck from Angelina's backrest, she fed him. The guardian deity's undignified behavior coaxed a laugh from Kyril, and Feilong breathed a sigh of exasperation.

Angelina felt giddy with happiness. How long had she yearned for this experience? She was surrounded by her loved ones, and they were celebrating her birthday. That was a blessing in itself.

When the banquet reached its full swing, Feilong stood up and handed the bundle of cloth in Phaenna's seat to Angelina.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Open it," Feilong replied.

After unwrapping the package, Angelina stiffened. Upon failing the Naming Trial in her first life, Chief Lady in Waiting Mion had given her a dagger. The package contained that exact blade. Back then, Marfa had interpreted the dagger as Feilong instructing Angelina to commit suicide. Consequently, Marfa had quarreled with the emperor, which led to her execution.

The blood drained from Angelina's face. *Were all my attempts to change the past this time around meaningless?*

Without thinking, Marfa prostrated herself before Feilong. "With all due respect, I must ask you a question, Your Majesty! What in the world do you mean by this? Did Princess Angelina's grandmother—the Queen of Yule—not use that dagger to commit suicide? By giving the princess that blade, are you implying...?"

Marfa trailed off there. She didn't want Angelina to hear her next words. She

couldn't let the princess know what this dagger implied—that she should take her own life.

Kyril looked at Feilong with an expression of incredulity. "Father, why would you give Grandmother's instrument of suicide as a present...?"

Ryuho and the old knight glowered at Feilong as well. At the same time, Angelina hugged herself and trembled. The Golden Dragon wrapped himself around her and cast Feilong a withering glare.

Feilong jolted in surprise. He hadn't considered the meaning behind the gift too deeply.

"No, you misunderstand!" he shouted. "That's not what I meant! Hear me out. This blade... It's called the Dagger of Mercy. Phaenna entrusted it to me, and according to her, it's proof that one is Queen of Yule!"

Marfa gasped. "Indeed, I have heard of a dagger passed down through generations of Yulan queens. To think this is the same blade..."

"Phaenna left me with this one request," Feilong said. "If she gave birth to a daughter, and that girl didn't pass the Naming Trial on her fifth birthday, she wanted to give her the Dagger of Mercy. This blade would prove her to be Queen of Yule, even if she didn't become an heir to the Jinlongian throne."

Angelina looked up at Feilong. "Mudder said that...?"

"That's right. Even so, Angelina has already received the last name Xin Lei. She's not the Queen of Yule but the Imperial Princess of Jinlong. So I've been wondering what to do with this dagger." Feilong caressed the blade lovingly. "But last year, Kyril officially became the crown prince. Since Angelina won't inherit the throne, I couldn't think of a better opportunity to give her this memento."

"A memento of Mudder's..." Angelina mumbled.

"Exactly. You don't have anything from your mother, do you? In any case, she left this dagger to you. It might be an inauspicious object with a dark history, but Phaenna still treasured it as proof she was Queen of Yule."

After hearing Feilong's explanation, Marfa bowed her head. "I apologize for

acting above my station," she said, her forehead scraping the floor.

"...No," Feilong answered with a weak laugh. "My past easily invites misunderstandings."

I was the one who threatened to kill Lina if I ever saw her, Feilong thought. And now, I gave her a dagger once used for suicide. Who could blame them for misunderstanding?

"This is certainly an inauspicious object," Feilong continued. "It probably wasn't suitable to give as a gift." Smiling sadly, he began rewrapping the dagger.

"No," Angelina said, placing her hand atop his. "I want it."

Feilong raised his head.

"If this dagger was important to Mudder, I want to cherish it too," she explained.

"It doesn't frighten you?"

Angelina shook her head lightly. "If Grandmudder took her life with this dagger, then it knows her last moments. I think that's why Mudder cherished it so much. This knife proves that Yule existed, even if the country and queen disappeared. It's proof that Mudder existed too. It was probably very important to her."

Tears spilled from Marfa's eyes. A line of queens had once reigned over the ruined nation of Yule. Despite excelling at magic, their nation had avoided conflict. As a result, various surrounding countries had targeted them. In the end, the previous Emperor of Jinlong had destroyed Yule. As a last resort, Angelina's grandmother slew herself with the Dagger of Mercy, giving up her life to place a magical seal upon the castle.

After losing their country, the people of Yule became nomads. The young Princess Phaenna fled from the defeated nation with the Dagger of Mercy. Ultimately, Jinlong captured her, and she lived as a hostage thereafter. As a nationless princess, she'd lacked any support. Thus, her life inside the Canopy had been one of misfortune. This single dagger had been the only royal treasure left to her.

Sometime later, she met Feilong, who'd suffered similar persecution. Love had blossomed between them, and in a surprising turn of events, she became the Empress of Jinlong.

"Proof that she existed," Marfa mumbled in a nasal tone.

"According to Phaenna, Lina is half made from me," Feilong said. "In that case, Lina is half made from Phaenna as well."

Angelina's eyes widened in surprise. "I'm half made from Mudder...?"

"That's right. And so is Kyril."

Kyril looked at his father with surprise as well.

"And so, I must provide both of you with happiness," Feilong said. "The happiness that Phaenna would have experienced in life." He continued in a whisper, "I should have realized that much, much sooner..."

As Feilong sank into regret, Angelina squeezed his hand. "Fodder," she called out to him. Alas, she had no idea what else to say. During her repeating loops, she'd suffered countless times due to her father's disinterest. Though she couldn't forgive him completely, she didn't want to see him in this much anguish.

After letting go of Angelina's hand, Feilong began rewrapping the dagger. Once finished, he handed it to her again. "Lina," he said. "No, Angelina—you who bear the name of a Yulan tianshi. Take this dagger, for it proves you are Princess of Yule."

Angelina took the dagger and unfolded the cloth. The knife was small, the blade was thin, and it was sheathed in a silver scabbard. Clearly, it had been made with a woman carrying it in mind. Rather than a sword, it looked like a long cross.



Three almond-shaped stones were embedded into the pommel. They formed a radial pattern reminiscent of a flower. It was the same shape as the Tianshi's Protective Seal on Angelina's palm. The stones were red rubies the color of a dove's blood. Finally, the sheath had been decorated with a winglike ornamentation.

In her previous lives, it had terrified Angelina. "This is proof that His Majesty has rejected you," Mion had told her. Even worse, it had been the reason for Marfa's execution. "Your mere existence is a sin," the knife had seemed to accuse her. Even so, she couldn't throw it away, as she'd never received anything else from her father. When she'd fled the castle, she'd brought this knife with her and nothing else.

Yet now that she understood the circumstances, Angelina wanted to cherish the dagger. Slowly and lovingly, she unsheathed it. Since the dagger was made to stab rather than cut, its edges weren't sharp. The knife was closer to an awl than a dagger, sporting a sharp, triangular point. Moreover, the metal shone without a speck of rust. It had likely been handled with great care.

Father must have cherished this as a memento of Mother's as well, Angelina thought. Why did he give me such a precious object in my first life?

Apparently, Mion had misrepresented Feilong's true feelings during Angelina's first life. How *had* he felt about his daughter back then? There was no way of knowing now.

Still, Father cherishes me in this life, Angelina thought.

The silver blade reflected her azure eyes. At that moment, the red stones on the pommel sparkled with light. Marfa gasped; the radiance seemed to be acknowledging Angelina as the dagger's master.

"You were here all along," a disembodied voice said.

Angelina whipped her head around the room. Where had the unfamiliar voice come from? It seemed to have originated from the dagger, but how could a blade speak?

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

“I feel like I heard something...” she answered.

Ryuho strained his ears and observed their surroundings. Kyril and the Golden Dragon furrowed their brows, going on the alert.

“Nope, don’t hear anything,” Ryuho said.

“I see,” Angelina replied. “It must have been my imagination. I wouldn’t be able to hear a sound inaudible to you!”

As a Flame Tiger, Ryuho’s five senses were sharper than a normal human’s. His ears would have picked up on anything out of the ordinary.

After sheathing the dagger, Angelina rewrapped it in the cloth, bowed her head to Feilong, and said, “Thank you, Fodder.”

As Feilong nodded silently, the Golden Dragon slithered away from the chair. He rubbed his belly against the top of the blade. At once, golden light enveloped the Dagger of Mercy.

“I’m placing my protection upon the blade,” he explained. “This way, it won’t hurt Angelina.”

His words filled Angelina with relief, and she squeezed her mother’s memento in her arms.

Chapter 2: Angelina and the Advancing Wisdom Academy

SPRINGTIME had arrived. Boats floated down the waterways of the Purple Forbidden Palace, cutting through the numerous flower petals floating atop the water's surface.

Hisame Hirefu—the sixth Prince of Anda—traveled northwards through the palace on top of a rocking palanquin. His long, navy hair swayed in the wind. Unlike last year, he'd pulled his hair into a bun and wore men's robes. If not for his clothes, however, he still could have been mistaken for a girl due to his gentle features. A rose quartz amulet sparkled at his hip. Last year, he and Angelina had bought different colored amulets at the festival celebrating Kyril's ascension.

Now ten years old, Hisame would begin living in the Canopy of the Emperor from this spring onwards. He would study abroad at Advancing Wisdom Academy, which was also in the Canopy.

Hisame's attendant, riding in the same palanquin, started a conversation. "The manor's a pretty long way away, isn't it?"

Until now, there hadn't been an Andan manor in the Canopy. Since Anda and Jinlong had been enemies for so long, Anda had never sent a hostage to the Canopy.

Hisame laughed. "The Andan manor is on the farthest southeastern edge of the Canopy, after all."

"The disrespect makes my blood boil!" the attendant roared, his indignation plain for all to see. "Is Jinlong mocking our great nation?!"

"This represents how much Jinlong fears us," Hisame replied. "Our manor being newer and bigger than the homes of other nations is proof of that."

The attendant snorted in satisfaction. "What keen insight, Prince Hisame! I

never would have considered that. But you're right—the cruel emperor prepared a large, new manor for Anda because he fears us!"

Hisame smiled vaguely. In all honesty, he didn't believe Feilong had placed the manor so far away because he feared Anda. The emperor didn't trust fiends as their two nations had been at war until recently. As such, it was the natural decision to place the Andan manor in a remote section of the Canopy. Regardless, Hisame had come up with that alternative explanation to satisfy a fellow Andan.

Fiends loved showing off their strength. According to their worldview, might made right, after all. Thus, Hisame needed to put on a bold front to avoid ridicule in Andan society.

Hisame stepped down from the palanquin. After putting on his conical hat, he draped a cloth over his face. It was customary for Andan people to wear it in foreign countries to hide their fangs and horns. Unfortunately, it only served to increase their uncanny appearance.

"It's a fiend..." someone whispered.

When Hisame turned in the direction of the voice, multiple people looked away in fright.

The attendant's lips curled into a sinister, satisfied smile. "Looks like they're scared of us, Prince Hisame." He appeared to be basking in a sense of superiority at stoking their fear.

I'm exhausted, Hisame thought while stifling a sigh. I don't like this way of doing things.

"It would seem so," he agreed aloud. "Well then, please head back for now. I don't want to be criticized as a coward for dragging an attendant around."

The attendant nodded in satisfaction.

The Jinlongian royal family and hostages from vassal nations studied at the Advancing Wisdom Academy—the Canopy's place of learning. Not even people of high standing could bring servants there.

"You are most admirable, Prince Hisame," the attendant said. "You're

composed even in an enemy camp. Well then, I'll come pick you up at a later time."

After parting with his attendant, Hisame waited for Angelina at the entrance.



THE Purple Forbidden Palace had two methods of advancing one's studies. The children of influential Jinlongian families and bureaucrats who lived in the Left Enclosure attended one school. Those who lived in the Right Enclosure—otherwise known as the Canopy—attended another school.

The Left Enclosure's academy was referred to as Primary School, and classes were separated based on age. A person began schooling at the age of eight and graduated at fifteen. Those who wanted to become government officials would advance to the Imperial University. However, only those who passed the bureaucrat exam after graduating would become government officials.

Those who wanted to expand their specialized knowledge would attend the Imperial Academy. Magic wasn't studied at Primary School or the Imperial University, as it differed greatly based on one's individual nature. Rather, people studied magic after entering the Imperial Academy or under a home tutor.

On the other hand, the Canopy's place of learning was called the Advancing Wisdom Academy. Hostages from multiple surrounding vassal states studied at this private school. The Canopy had a high turnover rate of residents, and academic levels differed based on country. Because so few people attended the Advancing Wisdom Academy, the concept of school years didn't exist. Everyone studied at their individual pace based on their aptitude. Yet, due to the Canopy's communal lifestyle, everyone learned together rather than hiring home tutors. After graduating, those who wanted to continue studying could attend the Imperial Academy.

Per tradition, the Jinlongian royal family had attended the Advancing Wisdom Academy for generations. In fact, Angelina would start attending this year. Despite being somewhat young for school, she would attend at the same time as Ryuho, who'd just turned eight. Junshi Lang—Angelina's private tutor—had been the one to convince Feilong to enroll her in school early. He'd done this

for her benefit, as she was so intelligent.

Junshi was a young man who spoke in a relaxed tone, and his drooping, purple eyes radiated kindness. He'd discovered Angelina's brilliance. Currently, he was doing everything in his power to make her dreams come true.

Incidentally, Kyril had graduated early, having skipped several grades thanks to his good marks. As of now, he was studying magic and internal administration while participating in government affairs.

Angelina headed towards the academy with Ryuho, her brand-new bag filled with writing utensils. As the pair marched alongside each other, the rays of the spring sun felt warm and pleasant on their skin. Meanwhile, bush warblers sang back and forth competitively.

A young boy in Andan clothes stood at the entrance of the academy. It was Hisame. When the students walking back and forth noticed him, they whispered to each other.

“Why is a fiend here?”

“It’s true then—an Andan student is studying here this year.”

“Will we be able to have class together? I’ve heard fiends are violent.”

The cruel whispers reached Hisame’s ears. He bit his lip and stood up straight. He couldn’t let anyone else know how disheartened he felt. In any case, he still wore the conical hat and cloth face covering befitting an Andan prince. As a result, the other students avoided him, as if there was an invisible wall around him.

This is about what I expected, he thought. Beginnings are always the hardest...

Being regarded as an oddity caused Hisame to lose his composure. He'd been the one to propose studying abroad in Jinlong. That way, he could be close to Angelina and stay true to himself. Unfortunately, his resolve was already being tested.

Upon finding her friend standing at the entrance, Angelina called out to him. “Hisame!”

She ran over to him with a bounce in her step. When Angelina first met

Hisame last year, he'd parted his hair down the middle and worn the clothes of a young girl. Presently, his hair was pulled into a bun, and he wore boy's clothes. Nonetheless, he still had the rose quartz amulet from last year's festival attached to his sash. Angelina had a matching lapis lazuli amulet fastened to her waist as well.

"Angelina!" Hisame cried.

The two friends joined hands. Upon seeing Angelina, Hisame's heart grew much lighter. After all, he could act like himself around her.

"Lina!" Ryuho yelled, breaking the other two apart. He hissed in Hisame's direction.

Ryuho's loud voice startled Hisame, causing him to shrink into himself. Hisame was a coward by nature who couldn't handle yelling. He felt very self-conscious about that.

Angelina looked up at Ryuho with a puzzled expression. "What's wrong, Ryuho?"

Hisame glanced at the other boy. "...Ryuho?" he repeated.

Rather than responding, Ryuho merely puffed out his cheeks sullenly.

Hisame then looked at Angelina. "He has the same name as your tiger?"

Angelina responded to Hisame's surprise with a strained smile. Ryuho averted his gaze awkwardly. Until now, Hisame had only seen Ryuho in his feline form. The Nanranese royal family had kept Ryuho's identity as a Flame Tiger a secret. They feared people interpreting his childish statements as the oracles of a sacred beast. When Ryuho enrolled in the academy, his older sister Shua instructed him to keep his feline form a secret. Thus, Ryuho couldn't reveal himself as a Flame Tiger—not even to an acquaintance like Hisame.

"You think that's weird?!" Ryuho spat.

Hisame quivered. "N-No, not really..."

As Hisame continued acting flustered, Angelina took his hand. "Ryuho is my good friend," she said. "I'd be happy if you two could get along."

When Angelina grinned, Hisame couldn't help but respond with a nod.

“I’m Ryuho Ruo,” he introduced himself in an offhand manner. “A Prince of Nanran!”

“And I’m Hisame Hirefu—a Prince of Anda.”

Hisame timidly lifted his cloth face covering to observe Ryuho. When the other boy responded with a withering glare, Hisame hid his face again. Ryuho’s straightforward eyes were too radiant to behold.

“Do you have to wear that cloth, Hisame?” Angelina asked. “It’s sad not being able to see your face.”

“Well, I don’t *have* to wear it, but...” Hisame trailed off.

He considered his face covering a good disguise. For starters, it prevented others from reading his facial expressions. Likewise, no one would know what he was thinking or looking at. Since Hisame had an anxious nature, wearing the cloth provided him with a sense of relief. It made him feel protected.

Hisame was worried about something else as well. He’d matured since last year, and as a result, he’d begun to display the traits of an Andan. Hisame’s rapidly changing body scared him and made him uneasy and embarrassed. Truth be told, he just wanted to hide.

“I’ve started growing fangs and a horn,” Hisame said. “They might scare you...”

Hisame was fond of Angelina. Since she was unaccustomed to seeing fangs and horns, catching a glimpse of them would probably frighten her. If nothing else, Hisame didn’t want Angelina to hate him.

“Ryuho has fangs, too, y’know?” Angelina noted.

She beckoned to Ryuho, who bent down and brought his face close to hers. Then, she opened his mouth and showed his fangs to Hisame.

“They’re cool, aren’t they?” she asked with a grin. “Not scary at all.”

Ryuho looked rather pleased with himself.

After bending down in front of Angelina, Hisame timidly lifted his face covering. A slight protrusion grew from his forehead. Though it wasn’t yet large enough to be called a horn, it was clearly a trait that Jinlongian people didn’t

possess.

“It looks like a bump,” Angelina said while gazing at the protrusion curiously. “Does it hurt?”

“Not at all,” Hisame replied.

“May I touch it?”

“...Sure.”

When Angelina grazed Hisame’s horn with her fingers, the small protrusion proved harder than expected. She rubbed the horn like a cat’s forehead, as it felt nothing like a painful bump.

“May you become a magnificent horn!” Angelina cried, her right palm glowing with light.

Indescribable happiness overcame Hisame, and he narrowed his eyes blissfully. Just being patted by Angelina lessened his embarrassment about his differences. He now wanted his bump to grow into a magnificent horn, just as Angelina had said. When Hisame smiled, his fangs sparkled in his mouth.

“Yep!” Angelina cried. “Just like I thought—fangs are cool!”

Ever the competitive one, Ryuho exposed his teeth as well. “But my fangs are so much cooler!”

Upon seeing this, Hisame giggled. *I feel like an idiot for being so self-conscious,* he thought.

He took off his face covering, and his field of vision opened up all at once. Spring sunlight shone down upon Angelina’s hair, causing it to sparkle. A rainbow luster glittered in her azure eyes, which could have been excised from the sky itself. Her soft cheeks were as plump as peaches and seemed just as delicate.

“I might have missed out on seeing something precious,” Hisame mumbled to himself with a soft laugh.

Upon seeing his charming smile, the students watching them from a distance gasped. Angelina and Ryuho already stood out on their own, and now, they were having a friendly conversation with the handsome Prince of Anda. The

students all leveled envious gazes at the group. When Hisame noticed all the attention, he flushed and hung his head.

“It looks like everyone wants to be friends with you,” Angelina said with a laugh.

“Come on already—we’ve gotta get to class,” Ryuho pestered, pulling her by the hand. “Right, Lina?”

“Yeah, let’s go!”

When Angelina and Ryuho raced off together, Hisame chased after them as fast as possible. Despite being new, this place was no longer frightening.



CLASSES at the academy began with cleaning and greetings. In short, they taught things important to character building. Afterward, they studied Jinlongian reading and writing, arithmetic, geography, the calendar, martial arts, and equestrian arts.

Hisame excelled at reading, writing, and arithmetic. However, he struggled with martial and equestrian arts. Conversely, Ryuho excelled at martial and equestrian arts but struggled with reading, writing, and arithmetic. While Angelina liked equestrian arts, she found martial arts a bit frightening. All three had their strengths and weaknesses. Thus, each day brought its fair share of struggles.

As a pure-hearted and lively young boy, Ryuho naturally became the leader of playtime. Since Angelina was the youngest pupil, older students who wanted to act mature helped teach her with great attention. One of those students was Shua—Ryuho’s older sister.

Getting used to the academy will probably take a long time, Hisame had worried at first. Yet the other students began talking to him amicably when he spent time with Angelina and Ryuho. Thanks to Hisame’s calm demeanor and rich knowledge, the younger children looked up to him as an older brother.



MORNING classes had ended, and lunch break had arrived. Though the

students enjoyed meals in the cafeteria, it was also a place to learn etiquette. Ryuho sat beside Angelina, and Hisame sat across from them.

“Ugh, I’m dead tired...” Ryuho complained, leaning against Angelina.

“If you don’t obey the rules, you’ll get scolded, y’know?” Angelina warned.

“Gimme a minute to rest, Lina. I’m exhausted...”

Ryuho already felt tense from going about his daily life while hiding his tail and ears. That alone would have worn him out, but he’d also been forced to study all day—something he greatly disliked.

“I mean, c’mon,” Ryuho said. “What’s the point of calling the Three Ducal Ministers the Three Pagoda Trees? It just complicates things!”

The Three Ducal Ministers were government officials in Jinlong. Angelina’s class had just learned they were also called the Three Pagoda Trees. Ryuho didn’t understand why anyone would change their name to something so complicated.

“I don’t care if three pagoda trees were planted in some garden!” he huffed. “It doesn’t matter! Jinlongian history’s got nothing to do with me! What’s the point of learning about stuff that already happened?! Wouldn’t getting stronger be a better use of my time? Why do I have to study all this junk?!”

Angelina understood Ryuho’s point of view all too well. Learning history could be boring if you had no interest in it.

“Because history repeats itself,” Hisame said.

When Angelina and Ryuho looked up, Hisame’s eyes widened in surprise, and his mouth snapped shut.

“What do you mean, Hisame?” Angelina asked.

In response to her encouragement, Hisame opened his textbook.

“You want to study even more during lunch break?” Ryuho groaned. “Let’s go play outside already!”

“You can go play if you want,” Hisame replied with a laugh. “I’ll stay here and talk to Angelina.” He then placed his textbook in front of Angelina and brought

his face close to hers.

“Don’t get so close!” Ryuho shouted.

Hisame pressed his finger to his lip in a shushing motion. “Today, we learned about a war between Jinlong and Peijan five hundred years ago. As a result, a country between the two nations was destroyed. More recently, the same thing happened to Yule, between Jinlong and Porin’ya.”

Hearing about her mother’s homeland piqued Angelina’s curiosity. “Do you know why Yule was destroyed, Hisame?”

Angelina gazed at Hisame so earnestly that Ryuho couldn’t suppress his jealousy.

“I do,” Hisame responded with a nod. “Your mother was Yulan, wasn’t she? According to legend, the Yulan royal family is descended from a tianshi, and their nation is the birthplace of magic. The Tianshi’s Protective Seal on your hand is supposedly the oldest magical emblem and originated from Yule.”

Angelina stared down at her palm. Usually, the protective seal looked like a pale, white birthmark. When tinged with magic, however, the three almond-shaped markings would turn red and stand out in a radial pattern.

“The Tianshi’s Protective Seal has lost its original magical power,” Hisame continued. “Even so, it remains a charm in various countries, although its color, shape, and surrounding characters often differ. The Kalavinka paints the same marking on her forehead, remember?”

“Does it exist in Anda too?” Angelina asked.

“Yes, but the characters written around the seal are Andan.”

“I see... So why would a country like Yule fall to ruin?”

“Apparently, the royal family possessed a powerful magic called the Yulan Secret Arts,” Hisame explained. “Jinlong and many other countries wanted that power. Still, Yule had always been a small country that eked out a meager existence thanks to the queen’s magic. The last Queen of Yule feared her kingdom might get caught up in a war between two larger nations, and one of them would abuse the Yulan Secret Arts. And so, she used the last of her

remaining magic to seal away the castle.”

Hisame sneaked a glance at Angelina. As a descendant of the Yulan royal family, it couldn’t have been a pleasant conversation for her. Hisame wanted to confirm that he hadn’t upset her.

“What happened next?” Angelina asked.

“Jinlong took the young Yulan princess as a prisoner of war,” Hisame answered. “They were interested in the legends of the royal family being descended from a tianshi.”

“Grandfodder destroyed Yule and took Mudder hostage?”

“...Maybe it just so happened to occur during the previous emperor’s reign,” Hisame mumbled. “He might not have ordered it himself.”

Mother’s family was murdered while she was still a child, and then she was carted off to a foreign country, Angelina thought dumbfoundedly. What’s more, she died while still young after giving birth to me. Was she ever happy?

“Oh, I think I get it now!” Ryuho chimed in with a laugh. “Lina’s here now ‘cause all that happened, right? The past and future are connected! I’m so glad we were able to meet!”

Ryuho’s words helped brighten the heavy atmosphere.

“Yeah, me too!” Angelina exclaimed, bumping her head against him. “I want to learn more about Jinlong and Yule! I might find out some unpleasant things, but it’s better than turning a blind eye to the truth!”

Hisame breathed a sigh of relief and nodded. “I agree. There are plenty of awful things in Anda’s past, too. That’s why I want to study my nation’s history and prevent it from repeating.”

Angelina and Hisame smiled at each other. “Then let’s study together,” they encouraged each other in unison.

Feeling left out, Ryuho let out a whine inaudible to human ears.

“We have martial arts class in the afternoon, Ryuho,” Angelina said, patting him on the head.

Ryuho's head shot up. Due to his overwhelming happiness, he pressed down on his hair, worried his tiger ears might have popped out. When everything seemed okay, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Is something wrong, Ryuho?" Hisame asked.

"...Oh, it's nothing," Ryuho answered with a dopey laugh. He was still keeping his feline form a secret from Hisame. At that moment, he had to look away because he was such a bad liar.

Hisame continued looking at him worriedly. "You promise you're okay?"

In an attempt to stave off the awkwardness, Ryuho stood up. "I'm, uh, heading out early!"

He shot out of the cafeteria.



MARTIAL arts class had begun, and a giddy Ryuho held a wooden sword in both hands. He was already a skilled swordsman, but more importantly, moving helped clear his mind. Thanks to his innate athletic ability, he could master almost anything physical through observation, regardless of whether he understood the logic. In any event, he looked forward to this class every day.

Today, Yuen Lang—Feilong's right-hand man—was giving special instruction in swordsmanship. Often referred to as a god of war, Yuen was the most proficient swordsman in Jinlong next to Feilong. He was truly the embodiment of a warrior, sporting purple hair and hulking muscles. Likewise, his perpetually composed, purple eyes radiated fierce determination. All those who sought martial prowess held him in the highest esteem.

Normally, Yuen didn't teach swordsmanship to children, but Feilong had ordered him to observe the class, as he was worried about Angelina. If Yuen had refused, Feilong likely would have barged into the class himself. Thus, Yuen had accepted the emperor's request. Moreover, the academy had accepted the enrollment of an Andan prince for the first time. Yuen wanted to gauge the strength of this prince for himself.

Yuen trained with everyone who'd entered the academy this year in a specified order. He disregarded their genders, ages, national origins, and social

standings. However, after casually skipping Angelina, Hisame's turn came up. The boy didn't display the ambitious spirit befitting an Andan prince. His sword stances were textbook perfect as if drilled into him. At the same time, he seemed to lack experience in actual combat. To his credit, Hisame maintained a beautifully courteous appearance even when he lost, which impressed Yuen.

Ryuho's turn came up last. Though his form was incredibly sloppy, he was stronger than all the other children. He bounced and danced around like a roaring flame. Yuen immediately regretted letting his guard down just because Ryuho was a child.

For his part, Ryuho was having the time of his life. He'd been the strongest even back in Nanran, so he couldn't go all-out against the other children. As a result, he was absorbed in his sparring match against Yuen.

This is so fun! Ryuho shouted internally. I could do this forever!

And so, he and Yuen continued exchanging blows, focused solely on each other. With each strike, they both grew more and more serious.

I can keep fighting! Just as that thought occurred to him, Ryuho's tailbone squirmed. Oh crap, my tail! I wasn't paying enough attention!

Without thinking, he let go of his wooden sword and pressed his hands to his tailbone. At that moment, Yuen struck him lightly on the torso.

Ryuho had lost.

That plunged him into a state of shock. Losing that way was so frustrating. Worse, having his fun end so abruptly filled him with sadness.

“I’ve had enough of this!” he shouted, tossing aside his wooden sword and sprinting out of the room.

“Ryuho!” Angelina cried out in an attempt to stop him.

Alas, Ryuho didn’t turn around to face her.



RYUHO had returned to the North Star Sanctuary. He was curled up in his Flame Tiger bed with the covers draped over him. Naturally, he’d returned to his feline form. He hadn’t eaten dinner, breakfast, or any snacks in between.

The day after Ryuho's absconding, Angelina brought a worried Shua to her room. As Ryuho's older sister, who also attended the Advancing Wisdom Academy, Shua had heard about the sparring match with Yuen.

"What's wrong, Ryuho?" Shua sat down on the corner of his bed.

As Ryuho sobbed beneath the blanket, Angelina sat next to Shua and patted him from atop the fabric.

"I'm not going to the academy anymore..." Ryuho mumbled.

"I see," Shua replied. "And why's that?"

"I'm no good at studying, and school is boring. I don't wanna go there anymore."

"But didn't you say that everything outside of studying was interesting? And everyone says that playing with you is fun. There are even children who want you to teach them martial arts. There's no need to push yourself too hard when it comes to studying."

"Yeah, but I lost to Yuen just yesterday!" Ryuho shouted while still sobbing beneath the blanket. He slapped his tail against the bed to express his deep frustration. "I might've been able to beat him with just a little more effort!"

"Everyone loses sometimes," Shua replied with an exasperated sigh. "That's part of life, isn't it?"

Ryuho leapt out of bed. "Yeah, maybe you're right! I wouldn't care about losing if I could fight my hardest! But yesterday was different! I lost 'cause I thought my tail might pop out! I could've kept fighting if I hadn't thought about it!"

At this, his ears pinned back, and he bore his fangs. Likewise, his back arched, and his orange fur bristled.

"Why do I have to keep it a secret that I'm a Flame Tiger?!" he continued shouting. "Both forms are part of who I am! I can never go all out 'cause I'm worried about people seeing my tail! It's boring! It's painful! Why am I the only one who has to hide himself?! Not even Hisame is hiding his horn! I want to show off my ears and tail!" Here, Ryuho's shouting turned back into sobbing.

“I’ve had enough of this! I hate lying! I don’t want to go to the academy if I can’t tell the truth!”

When Shua saw her little brother crying his eyes out in his feline form, she embraced him tightly. “But Ryuho, it’s a secret that children born to the Nanranese royal family can transform into Flame Tigers.”

“Why? Does it have to be a secret?”

“Well...” Shua trailed off.

The Nanranese royal family having Flame Tiger blood was a famous legend. Currently, however, Ryuho was the only member of royalty who could maintain a feline form. Some of their family would turn into a Flame Tiger during the unstable early childhood period, but that was always temporary. Normally, everyone lived the majority of their lives as humans.

Furthermore, there were instances when witnesses screamed in fright when they saw someone transform into a Flame Tiger. As such, the royal family had begun keeping the ability a secret. While it wasn’t a definitive rule, it was a way for the royal family to protect themselves—a means of surviving in a harsh world.

Certainly, legends of the royal family possessing holy beast blood had helped deify them. Yet, at the same time, some people disparaged them as inhuman. Some people even regarded them as frightening or strange.

“...Well, it doesn’t *need* to be a secret, but you might get hurt,” Shua answered evasively.

“Why would I get hurt?” Ryuho asked.

He was proud of being a Flame Tiger, after all. He expected everyone to praise his feline form.

Shua didn’t want Ryuho to experience others avoiding or fearing him for being inhuman. Most people who saw a tiger transform into a person—or the other way around—would react with frightened alarm. Shua had experienced that herself. After seeing someone’s face stiffen with fright, she’d been deeply hurt. *No one should see this form*, she’d concluded. *I don’t even want to be seen like this*.

Now, she didn't want her innocent little brother to suffer the same experience.

"Some people might be scared when they see you as a tiger," Shua explained.

Sniffing, Ryuho cocked his head and let out a silent whine. "They'll be scared of me?" he asked.

Angelina cocked her head as well. "I'm not so sure about that," she mumbled. "I mean, everyone in the Canopy gets along with Ryuho in his feline form, right?"

"That's true," Shua replied. "But when they find out the tiger and human Ryuho are the same person, they'll be surprised, won't they?"

"I was surprised at first, too," Angelina said. "But that was just because I didn't know any better, not because I was scared. I was frightened of Andan people, too, but once I got to know Hisame, my fear went away. After all, I learned that we could understand each other even if we looked different. People are probably afraid just because they don't understand the situation, don'tcha think? Once everyone learns that Ryuho is still himself, everything'll probably work out fine, y'know?"

Shua gasped softly. "People are afraid because they don't understand...?"

Angelina nodded. "Yep, yep!"

"I think you might be onto something there. Still, I have other worries. What if Ryuho's words are interpreted as the oracles of a holy beast?"

Even in Nanran, no Flame Tiger had ever spoken to humans while assuming their feline form, as Ryuho could. The words of a holy beast carried far more weight than the words of a human. Shua didn't think Ryuho could adopt appropriate speech and conduct for that responsibility. His mental state was still too young to act like a proper holy beast.

"I don't think you need to worry about that," Angelina said with a laugh. "Ryuho's just Ryuho! If you only knew a Flame Tiger as a holy beast, hearing one speak might sound like a god talking to you. But since everyone at the academy knows Ryuho, they'll be able to tell that he's just their same old classmate!"

Angelina mussed the fur around Ryuho's throat. Immediately, he stopped sniffling and purred in delight.

"You think so?" Shua asked while stroking her brother's cheek. "If you're right, I'll be very happy."

Ryuho responded by digging his forehead into her palm.

"I'll explain the situation to everyone!" Angelina cried. "And I'll wear tiger ears so that we match when we go to school!"

Ryuho's eyes lit up at that suggestion.

Shua nodded. *If Princess Angelina is by his side, I doubt Ryuho will get hurt too badly*, she thought. *And even if he does get hurt, he'll be able to overcome it.*

"Ryuho," Shua said. "I won't get on your case for showing off your ears and tail, but you still need to go to school as a human, okay? You won't be able to study with tiger paws."

Ryuho's tail stood straight up. "No problem, Sis!"

"Isn't this great, Ryuho?" Angelina asked.

"It sure is!" After rubbing his cheek against Angelina's, Ryuho pressed his nose to hers in a bunny kiss. "Love you, Lina!"

Angelina responded by nuzzling her nose against Ryuho's. "Love you, too!"

This sight warmed Shua's heart.

"See?" Ryuho asked, puffing out his chest and smirking. "I'm not weak enough that you have to worry about me, Sis. I'm not that pathetic!"

"Don't get cheeky with me," Shua replied, rubbing her brother's forehead. "Weren't you just crying your eyes out?"

She flicked him between the eyes.

"Ouch!" Ryuho exclaimed, simultaneously laughing and pressing down on his forehead.



THE next day, Angelina held Ryuho's hand while wearing decorative tiger

ears. Ryuho's true Flame Tiger ears sprouted from his head as well. Meanwhile, his tail twitched back and forth. He was anxious.

"Let's go!" Angelina cried, pulling Ryuho's hand to encourage him.

Ryuho's tail stood straight up, and he broke out into a grin. "Okay!"

The two of them dashed towards the Advancing Wisdom Academy. As usual, students gathered around them at the entrance, shouting with delight. While the group included Hisame, Shua observed them from afar.

"Your ears are so cute, Princess Angelina!" one student exclaimed.

"And so are Ryuho's!" another added.

Being surrounded by so many friendly voices allowed Ryuho to sigh in relief. "Mine are actually real!" he shouted, causing his ears to twitch.

As silence fell over the crowd, Shua's chest ached. She'd expected that reaction.

"...They're real?" a student asked.

"What do you mean?" another pressed.

Following the moment of silence, the crowd stirred with obvious bewilderment. None of them could hide their discomposure.

"Here's what I mean!" Ryuho cried, bobbing his tail in front of them. "This one's real too! Cool, right?"

The crowd fell into even greater confusion. Apparently, no one knew how to react. Ryuho's shoulders slumped. He loved his tail, after all. Though he knew everyone would be surprised at first, he'd expected them to cry out with delight in the end, as Angelina had done.

When Angelina noticed Ryuho's tail drooping, she squeezed it in her arms. "Ryuho's super fluffy!"

The tail responded by embracing her back. When Angelina grinned, satisfied, cheers rose from the crowd, and the children swarmed around Ryuho.

"Can I touch it too?" someone asked.

"Me too!"

“Me three!”

“Nope!” Ryuho shouted. “Lina’s the only one who can touch my tail ‘cause she’s special!” As he spoke, his tail puffed out.

“Wow, that’s amazing!” a student cried out.

Ryuho fled into the academy while surrounded by children.

A moment later, Hisame approached Angelina with nary a sound. “Angelina. Is Ryuho...?”

Angelina folded her hands together while wearing a guilty expression. “I’m sorry for lying. Both Ryuhos are the same person.”

“You mean the Flame Tiger?”

“Yep. But I promised to keep it a secret, so... I’m sorry.”

Hisame felt somewhat shocked, but considering how despondent and remorseful Angelina appeared, he had no choice but to forgive her.

There are things I can’t talk about either, Hisame thought. Who am I to criticize Angelina? We’re both royalty, and I’m Andan, after all.

“No, it’s fine,” Hisame said. “There are things we can’t talk about sometimes.”

Despite being somewhat sad, Hisame fixed a smile on his face. Seeing Hisame force himself to smile broke Angelina’s heart. *Ryuho and I hurt him*, she realized, her chest aching.

“I really am sorry...” Angelina repeated herself.

When Angelina hung her head, Hisame patted her on the hair, his fingers grazing her decorative ears. *Come to think of it, do I still have the White Tiger ears I bought at the festival?* he wondered.

“Would it be okay if I wore my White Tiger ears too?” he asked.

Angelina’s head shot up. “Yeah!” she cried, her eyes sparkling. All traces of guilt had disappeared from her azure irises. “Of course it would!”

“Well then, I’ll wear mine tomorrow!”

And so, the two friends shared a laugh together.



FOR some time thereafter, wearing decorative cat ears and tails at the Advancing Wisdom Academy became popular.

Princess Angelina makes everyone around her happy, Shua thought.

Seeing that filled her with relief, and thus, she sent a report to Nanran.

Chapter 3: Angelina and the Barrel Organ

THE Lavender Star Flower Festival began on the ninth day of the ninth month. The festival celebrated the founding of Jinlong. Aster flowers resembling stars decorated the entire palace. Unlike the Crown Prince Ascension Ceremony, foreign dignitaries wouldn't be invited to the Purple Forbidden Palace for an official event. Instead, the royal family would perform a ceremony in the Hall of Utmost Reverence, where all imperial rites were conducted.

In any case, it was a holiday—the spirit of merrymaking filled all of Jinlong. Traveling performers and merchants from various countries had gathered in the empire, causing quite a stir. The traveling performers from the ruined nation of Yule were a particularly hot topic. By all accounts, they used magic and barrel organs to put on shadow puppet shows.

After losing their country, the people of Yule had become nomadic. During their journeys, traveling performers collected legends from the places they visited. Afterward, they put on shadow puppet shows reenacting these tales using their innate magic.

In the three years since Empress Phaenna's death, the trade of Yulan goods had ceased in Jinlong. That had been in deference to Feilong, who'd been desperate to erase all memories of his departed wife. Yet, since Angelina became the imperial princess, Yulan goods were reintroduced to Jinlong. Apparently, traveling Yulan performers would even be visiting the palace for the festival.

"Have you ever seen a Yulan shadow puppet show, Angelina?" Hisame asked.

"Nope," Angelina replied. "Is that something Yulans do?"

"It is. I saw a performance in Anda, and it was really interesting."

Angelina cocked her head. "There are Yulans in Anda?"

Yule stood on the southwest corner of Jinlong. In contrast, Anda stood to the empire's east. Angelina had thought the countries were too far apart.

“When Jinlong destroyed Yule, its citizens fled to every surrounding country,” Hisame explained. “Some of them even sought refuge in Anda.”

That broke Angelina’s heart. After learning so much history at the Advancing Wisdom Academy, she understood the Yulan plight. Even so, they were a strong group of people. Despite losing their country, they survived while passing on their culture.

“Yulan performers know a lot of stories because they visit so many different countries,” Hisame said. “Their music is strange and fascinating as well. According to rumor, some Yulan performers are going to be visiting for the upcoming festival.”

“I want to see them too!” Angelina exclaimed. “Do you think we can?”

Ryuho grinned. “Yeah, I’ll take you!”

Hisame glared at Ryuho. “Don’t worry about it, Angelina. Since I told you about the performers, I should be the one to take you to a show!”

Sparks flew between Hisame and Ryuho.

“Lina obviously wants to go with me!” Ryuho shouted, looking in her direction. “Right, Lina?”

Hisame stared at Angelina as well. “Yes, but I’ll be able to provide detailed explanations about the performance.”

“Let’s all go together!” Angelina cried. “I’m sure it’ll be fun!”

Ryuho and Hisame slumped their shoulders.

“You don’t get it at all!” Ryuho grumbled.

Hisame nodded. Both he and Ryuho wanted to hog Angelina to themselves during the festival. However, Angelina didn’t realize that at all.

“But anyways, I’ll need to ask Fodder for permission first,” she said.

Ryuho and Hisame exchanged glances. The cruel Emperor Feilong was an excessively doting father. He wouldn’t allow her to go out alone with a boy.

“...We might have to give up,” Hisame said.

Ryuho nodded. “Yeah, Feilong’s one nasty guy, after all...”

Both of them heaved a sigh. They only ever agreed with each other on those kinds of subjects.



AS Feilong finished his work at the Celestial Axe Tower, Angelina came dashing over to him.

“Fodder!” she cried.

“What is it, Lina?” he asked.

“May I play around the palace during the night of the festival?”

Feilong’s brow creased sullenly. His schedule for the festival was packed from morning to evening with ceremonies commemorating the empire’s founding. Even his breakfast and lunch were part of those ceremonies. As the emperor and the Son of God, he would have to consume ritual meals. Having a pleasant dinner with his family was the sole thing he’d been looking forward to on that hectic day. Now, his daughter had asked to go out that evening.

“Why do you want to go out?” Feilong asked.

Angelina grew flustered upon noticing her father’s displeasure. “Well, um, I wanted to watch a traveling Yulan performer’s shadow puppet show. Hisame told me about it...”

“...I see.”

“Ryuho and Mishter Knight will go with me. Is that okay?”

When Angelina looked at him anxiously, Feilong closed his eyes. He looked up at the ceiling and let forth a deep sigh, pinching the space between his brows.

“Fodder...” Angelina mumbled.

“I’ll invite the performers here,” Feilong decided in a few short words.

“Huh?”

“Yes. Watching a shadow puppet show after dinner doesn’t sound like a bad idea.”

“Um, what?” Angelina asked, growing flustered again. Her main goal was to see the shadow puppet show, but she still wanted to walk around the lower city

with Ryuho and Hisame. “I’ll go watch a show at the festival, so there’s no need to—”

Feilong interrupted her by firing off an order to a courtier. “Bring the most skilled shadow puppeteer to North Star Sanctuary on the night of the festival!”

The courtier dashed away to fulfill his order.

“How’s that, Lina?” Feilong asked, picking her up with an expression of deep satisfaction. “Are you happy?” When Angelina puffed out her cheeks, Feilong’s eyebrows knitted together. “You wanted to see a shadow puppet show, right?”

“I did, but...”

Angelina struggled to contain her frustration. Feilong had already ordered a courtier to find a traveling performer. The North Star Sanctuary’s courtiers were fast and proficient at their jobs. Arrangements were most likely being made already. Revoking the order now would cause trouble for a lot of people. When Angelina considered that, she couldn’t tell her father to stop. At the same time, disappointment welled up from the bottom of her heart. Something she’d been looking forward to for a long time had just been stolen from her. Thus, she vented her frustrations on her father.

“I don’t even want to know you right now, Fodder!” she shouted, slapping him on the arm. “Let me down!”

“What’s going on?” Feilong asked, his eyes wide with confusion.

He then set Angelina down. Usually, he did whatever she asked, as he didn’t want his daughter to hate him.

Angelina ran out of the room on toddling feet, not looking back at Feilong. Now alone, Feilong stared blankly into empty space, unable to understand what had just occurred.



NIGHT had fallen over the Lavender Star Flower Festival. Paper lanterns had been hung around the palace, vaguely illuminating the area. Small, purple flowers serving as decorations for the entire city swayed in the autumn wind.

A festival to commemorate the empire’s founding was being held inside and

outside the palace. Boisterous crowds had gathered in the open area before the Celestial Axe Tower, where stalls and stages had been built. Traveling performers from many countries had arrived for the festival, hoping to make a name for themselves in Jinlong.

Two such performers were having a conversation with each other now.

“Is it just me, or has it been easier to perform in the palace lately?”

“I’ve noticed that too. The palace never accepted traveling performers until Princess Angelina appeared.”

For most of his life, Feilong had spent every waking moment at war, never showing an interest in cultural activities. Recently, however, he’d begun to display a certain understanding of the arts. By all accounts, he was desperate to please his beloved daughter.

“We’re never going to get a better opportunity than this,” one of the performers said. “I’m going to make a name for myself here!”

If entertainers gained popularity in the palace, they could become resident performers there. Then, if they caught the eye of royalty, performing in front of the emperor could become a very real possibility. Rumors were already circulating among the entertainers about Yulan traveling performers being summoned to the palace for the festival.

“Princess Angelina is apparently good friends with the Kalavinka,” one of the performers said. “Your gravelly voice probably won’t impress her.”

The other performer shrugged. “Yeah, but who’s a match compared to the current Kalavinka?”

Both men shared a laugh while walking together. The fragrant scent of meat, the popping of cooking sorghum, and festival music filled the air. Children allowed to enjoy an evening out dashed to and fro. Boisterous sounds of the festival and the scent of tea olives drifted towards the North Star Sanctuary.



AFTER finishing the commemorative rituals, Feilong used his short breather to decorate Phaenna’s portrait with a branch of aster flowers. In the language of

flowers, asters meant *remembrance*.

The Lavender Star Flower Festival was a ceremonial way to remember the founders of Jinlong and extol their achievements. Though Feilong performed the rituals as an official duty, his heart wasn't in them. Respectively, his father and grandfather were called the foolish emperor and wise emperor. He had neither respect nor gratitude for either of them.

You are the only one I can dedicate these flowers to, Phaenna, Feilong thought.

He bowed to the flowers and then turned around to have dinner with the children she'd left behind.



ONCE dinner had ended, preparations for the shadow puppet show began. Feilong had summoned a group of Yulan performers traveling around Jinlong to the palace. Soon, they would put on a show in the North Star Sanctuary. Angelina sat on Feilong's lap with Kyril and Ryuho on either side of her. She was still somewhat angry, and being forced to sit on her father's lap irritated her.

Prime Minister Tomi, Feilong's right-hand man, Yuen, and Kyril's tutor, Junshi, were also present. All three men were related to Feilong's mother, Ryoui, and as such, he treated them as family. They'd been his confidantes even before he'd inherited the throne.

Feilong's trusted knights were keeping a watchful eye on the traveling performers. For their part, the performers stood uncomfortably to the side of the room, all wearing pitch-black Yulan attire.

A large, white curtain had been hung in the room where the shadow puppetry would be performed. A barrel organ was in front of the curtain. It looked like a cart with large wheels and a black-lacquered box resting on the top. A tianshi was engraved on the center, and a golden bell hung from the top. Furthermore, multiple Tianshi's Protective Seals decorated the sides of the box. Finally, two small tianshi figurines holding trumpets stood on either side of the large barrel organ.

"It looks like a baby carriage," Kyril told Angelina while observing the

instrument.

“How do you make the sound come out?” Ryuho asked.

The troupe leader spun the barrel organ around to show them the back. “When you turn this crank, it produces music,” he explained.

Slowly, the troupe leader turned the crank, causing a short section of music to drift from the barrel organ. At the same time, the tianshi on either side blew on their trumpets.

“Wow, that’s amazing!” Angelina squealed with delight. “What a pretty sound!”

The gentle tone of the wooden pipes enveloped the room. Captivated by the upcoming performance, Angelina immediately forgot about her frustrations with Feilong.

“It will sound even more wonderful when accompanied by the shadow puppetry,” the troupe leader said.

“Yeah, I can’t wait!” Angelina cried.

The troupe leader smiled at Angelina. He performed a deep bow like a theater director—right leg drawn back, left hand pressed across his abdomen, and right arm held aside. That caused Angelina’s heart to race with excitement. She sensed Yulan culture radiating from his bow, as she’d never seen anything like it in Jinlong.

“Well then, let’s begin the story,” the troupe leader said.

As the lights in the room faded, black shadow puppets appeared on the white curtain. The play told the story of Jinlong’s founding. Shadows wavered on the curtain in time with the barrel organ’s music. Despite being a shadow puppet show, splashes of vibrant color appeared here and there. The characters were leather dolls wrapped in cellophane. Since Angelina couldn’t spot rods or anything similar to manipulate the shadow puppets, perhaps the troupe was using magic.

The altogether wondrous performance spellbound the children. The comically designed characters moved in sync with Jinlongian-style music. However, the

music also produced a vaguely foreign ambience. In any event, Angelina found herself transfixed by each and every curiosity. It was as if she'd fallen into the shadow puppet world herself.

When the show ended, Angelina began clapping. Excitement danced through her. She'd never seen a shadow puppet show or a barrel organ before. Everything about the performance had been so novel and fascinating.

"Ryuho!" she cried. "That was amazing, wasn't it?"

"Yeah!" he shouted in answer. "It was a lot easier to understand than a textbook! All history lessons should be taught like this!"

When Feilong saw the children speaking to each other in high spirits, he smiled in satisfaction. The presents he gave Angelina never seemed to please her. In fact, they utterly perplexed her more often than not. For some reason, she'd been furious when he'd decided to summon traveling performers for the evening. Until now, she'd been giving him the cold shoulder, but in the end, tonight had been a success. Angelina looked truly happy, after all.

The troupe leader came to stand before Feilong and bowed his head, his blond hair falling like silk. "If you are that pleased with our show, would you allow us to put on one more short performance?"

Angelina looked at Feilong with eyes full of anticipation.

Feilong smiled back at his daughter. "Please do," he said to the troupe leader.

The troupe leader bowed deeply. "In that case, allow me to tell a Yulan story to Princess Angelina and Crown Prince Kyril, as our people's blood runs through their veins."

The traveling performers opened the barrel organ's lid and replaced the roll of paper with another one. Apparently, the sheet music produced the instrument's sound. Moments later, a new song drifted from it. The melody was quite different from Jinlongian music. It resembled the Yulan lullaby Feilong had sung to Angelina, its somber tone engendering a sense of nostalgia.

A winged tianshi danced gracefully upon the curtain. The story was modeled after a Yulan legend. After falling in love with each other, a tianshi and a Yulan queen began a romantic relationship. That led to the tianshi being cast out of

Heaven. In the end, the tianshi and the queen married each other, and they forged a golden bell as husband and wife. When they rang the bell and wished for happiness, the story concluded.

The lingering note of a bell echoed throughout the room.

“Was the tianshi happy even though he couldn’t go home...?” Angelina muttered to herself.

Before obtaining her current life, Angelina wouldn’t have been able to imagine his dilemma. In the past, she’d never had any family with whom she’d been reluctant to part from. Yet now, her feelings were complicated. Choosing between one’s family and the love of one’s life would be incredibly painful.

I have the best possible life right now, she thought. Could I part from Feilong, Kyril, and Ryuho? Not to mention Marfa, the knights, and Junshi?

When Angelina glanced at Ryuho, he looked back at her with a puzzled expression and grinned. “What’s the big deal if he can’t go home?” Ryuho asked. “I came all the way to Jinlong by chasing after Shua! The person who’s able to make the journey should just do that!”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Angelina replied.

Relief washed over her. After Shua had become a hostage, a worried Ryuho had traveled from Nanran to Jinlong to see her. Moreover, Shua couldn’t return to Nanran until her term as a hostage ended. In that sense, her situation was the same as the fallen tianshi’s.

As Angelina and Ryuho grinned at each other, the troupe leader sadly regarded them.

“Is something wrong?” Feilong asked him.

Despite looking a bit flustered, the troupe leader fixed a smile on his face. “No, they just seem to get along very well.”

“You couldn’t be more mistaken!” Feilong bellowed, squeezing Angelina in his arms.

“Um, Ryuho and I are good friends, y’know?” Angelina pointed out.

“Yeah, best friends!” Ryuho added.

Kyril, the troupe leader, and the other traveling performers all laughed.

“Well then,” the troupe leader said. “Would you like to turn the crank to finish the show, Princess Angelina?”

Angelina nodded emphatically and jumped down from Feilong’s lap. “I sure would!”

“Stop right there, Lina!” the emperor shouted. “You should never approach a stranger alone!”

Angelina turned around and waved at Feilong lightly. “Don’t worry, Fodder—I’m wearing the clothes with your magic cast on them!”

As her words suggested, Angelina’s clothes were special. First, the fabric had been crafted from magic silkworm thread. Second, it had been woven by singing Vinkas, who were said to have divine power. Last, Feilong—the strongest man in the empire—had personally cast protective magic on the outfit. Furthermore, protective magic had been cast on Angelina herself, not just her clothes. If someone tried to touch her with malicious intent, a crackling flash of light would ward them off.

“That’s right,” Kyril said. “What could anyone do with you, me, and the knights here, Father?”

Feilong nodded at that.

“I’m here too!” Ryuho shouted, standing up and joining Angelina’s side. “She’s not alone!”

Angelina took Ryuho’s hand, and the two circled around the barrel organ.

“Now then, place your hand on this crank, Princess of Yule,” the troupe leader instructed.

Angelina found that address strange. She was the Imperial Princess of Jinlong, not the Princess of Yule. Nevertheless, she placed her hand on the crank without considering the matter too deeply. At once, the airy sound of the wooden pipes filled the room. Then, the music from the earlier performance drifted from the barrel organ again.

“This song has an interesting trick to it,” the troupe leader said. “If you turn

the crank backward, it produces a different song.”

Per his instructions, Angelina turned the crank backward. As she did so, the Tianshi’s Protective Seal on her palm heated up and shone with light. Overcome with surprise, Angelina tried to pull her hand away. However, the troupe leader pressed her hand down and forced her to continue turning the crank.

“No, stop it!” Angelina squealed.

Angelina’s dress produced a crackling noise while shining with an ominous purple light. The garment’s protective magic had activated, rendering the barrel organ’s sorcery visible. Ryuho yanked the troupe leader’s hand off Angelina’s. “Stop it!” he bellowed, shoving the man away.

In response, the troupe leader donned a satisfied smile while stumbling backward. “The music can’t be stopped now!”

True to his words, the crank—which had started turning vigorously thanks to his strength—didn’t stop. Thus, music and purple light blended together to assault Angelina.

“Lina!” Feilong shouted, standing up and raising his hand.

The purple light coiling around Angelina’s dress changed trajectories and headed toward Feilong instead. As a result, he bore the brunt of the magical attack rather than Angelina. As his face twisted in pain, he gathered the purple light in his palm and threw it back at the troupe leader—a perfect magical rebound.

A magical rebound broke a spell before it was completed and reflected the spell back upon the caster. If the caster’s spell was powerfully wicked, the rebounded magic could sometimes result in death. When the purple light struck the troupe leader, he fell on his backside and let forth an anguished groan. The magical light enveloped his body like mist, produced a crackling sound, and sank into his body.

“Fodder!” Angelina cried.

“Father!” Kyril shouted.

Upon seeing Feilong, both his children fell silent. He hadn’t been able to

rebound the purple light entirely. It sank into his body through his palm and glowed from the inside. His body flickered in time with the music and then shrank to the size of a child.

“Apprehend the performers!” Kyril ordered.

As Yuen twisted the troupe leader’s arms behind his back, the knights surrounded the other performers. Meanwhile, Junshi closed the door.

“We have to stop the music!” Angelina shrieked.

She and Ryuho pressed down on the crank with all their might. Gradually, the music grew slower. Soon, the barrel organ ceased making sound altogether. At the same time, Feilong’s body stopped shrinking, and the purple light disappeared.

An incredibly small, naked boy sat in the pile of clothes that Feilong had been wearing. He appeared to be around three years old. Seeming utterly perplexed, he gathered up the robes in an attempt to protect himself.



Kyril found himself at a loss for words. He couldn't comprehend what was happening in front of him.

Father turned into a child? he thought. That shouldn't be possible, but...

Kyril stared at the child incredulously. He had the same ice-blue eyes and silver hair as Feilong. Though his plump, childlike cheeks begged to be pinched, his sharp nose was the same as Feilong's. When Kyril and Feilong met each other's eyes, the rainbow luster deep within their irises wavered.

There's no mistaking it, Kyril thought. This child is Father. In that case, what should I do...?

He looked back and forth between Feilong and Angelina. Both children were regarding each other dumbfoundedly, their expressions anxious. They appeared much frailer than usual. Unsure what else to do, Kyril squeezed his eyes shut.

Feilong was renowned for his cruelty and governed the enormous empire through his unparalleled might. If word of his powerlessness got out, vassal nations would seek independence, and surrounding nations would attack. Though Kyril had been named crown prince, he was still young and unrecognized in strength.

One small mistake could lead to war, he thought, his fingers trembling. I'm at a complete loss. What should I do?

All the while, his subordinates looked to him for a decision.

Regardless, I have to do something.

Kyril shook his head and steeled himself. He couldn't let this situation become public knowledge, so he began firing off orders.

“Tomi! Put a gag order on this event for the time being!”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

“Yuen! Interrogate the performers about their purpose and how to dispel the magic! Don't let them commit suicide!”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

“Junshi! I want you to personally study how to dispel the magic as well!”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

“Fodder!” Angelina cried, dashing over to him.

In response, Feilong shook his head, terror etched upon his face. It was as if he didn’t recognize her.

“Fodder...?” Angelina called out again, overcome with shock.

Feilong took a step backward. His eyes darted around the area, searching for an escape route.

“Do you not recognize me...?” Angelina asked. “Did you forget who I am...?”

She was so overcome with shock that she could hardly breathe. As pressure formed in her tear ducts, her blue eyes began to water. She could start crying at any moment.

“Fodder!” she yelped. “It’s me—Lina! Angelina!”

As she approached him, Feilong shook his head again, his face still a mask of terror. “Don’t come any closer! I don’t know anyone named Lina!”

The tears finally spilled from her eyes. *Father says he doesn’t know me...?* she thought. *Still, I told Father I didn’t even want to know him the other day. Was he as hurt as I am right now? That was a truly awful thing to say.*

“Fodder,” Angelina said, holding out her hand to him again. “It’s me—Lina. Don’t you remember?”

“Get away from me!” Feilong shouted, swatting her hand away. “I’ve never seen you before in my life!”

Tears continued trickling down Angelina’s cheeks. *I should never have said I didn’t want to know him, she thought. That was just a dumb lie. This is punishment for saying something so awful!*

Prime Minister Tomi came to stand between Angelina and Feilong. Years ago, the previous emperor had abandoned Feilong. As his uncle, Tomi had raised him alongside his children.

“Do you recognize me, Master Feilong?” Tomi asked gently.

Feilong looked up at him with obvious relief. “...Uncle?”

Tomi swaddled Feilong in his oversized robes and picked him up. "His Majesty's memories seem to have reverted back to his childhood as well."

Kyril marched over to the troupe leader. "What the hell did you do?!"

The troupe leader looked over at Feilong with an aggravated expression. "I never expected him to shield his daughter from the time-reversal magic."

"You were aiming for Angelina?!" Kyril roared.

As the troupe leader donned a self-deprecating smile, the rebounded magic smoldered and crackled around him. "To think the emperor loved her that much," he said, his voice growing feeble and hoarse. "I never accounted for that."

The other performers cried out in surprise.

"Sir! Why would you attack the Princess of Yule?!"

"Sir?!"

"Why...?! The Princess of Yule is our only hope!"

The troupe leader fell to his knees while bearing the criticism of the other performers. In the blink of an eye, his flesh started to wrinkle. When his face and body grew as desiccated as a withered tree, he began to crumble away.

"Don't look, Lina!" Ryuho shouted while covering her eyes.

The surface of the former troupe leader peeled away flake by flake. In the end, only a wooden doll remained. Yuen furrowed his brow.

Overcome with shock, Angelina quivered violently. Her understanding couldn't keep up with everything that had just occurred. Tears gushed from her eyes like water from a broken dam.

"...He wanted to kill me?" she asked, utterly confused.

If Feilong had shielded her from killing magic, he probably would have died. However, he'd turned into a child instead. By that logic, the troupe leader's spell hadn't been killing magic.

Father warned me against approaching strangers, but I didn't listen to him, Angelina thought. Did he turn into a child because I misbehaved?

“Wh-What’s going on?” Angelina asked. “Why is Fodder so small? Is it my fault? M-My...?”

If that magic had struck me, would I have returned to before I was born? she wondered. What is time-reversal magic, anyway? Why did he need to reverse time in the first place? Do he and the Yulan people wish I was never born? Is killing me not enough? They want to return me to before I was born?

“Should I have never been born...?” Angelina muttered to herself.

She’d asked herself that question many times while looping over and over again. If she hadn’t been born, her mother wouldn’t have died. So, why *had* she been born? What was the meaning of a life that didn’t bring anyone joy? Her current, happy life had finally answered those questions. Her father and brother cherished her, after all. Likewise, she’d made friends such as Ryuho and Hisame. *I’m glad I was born*, she’d finally been able to believe.

But now, there are people right in front of me who would give up their lives to turn back time to before I was born.

Being confronted with that truth made it difficult to breathe. “...Maybe I really shouldn’t have been born,” she murmured.

“Don’t be stupid!” Ryuho shouted, grabbing Angelina’s shoulders and turning her to face him. He grabbed her head and pressed her face into his chest. “Listen to me! If you keep talking like that, I’ll get really mad! I won’t forgive you! I won’t be your friend anymore!”

“But Fodder turned into a toddler because of me.”

“That wasn’t your fault!”

“But—”

“It was the troupe leader’s fault—he’s the bad guy here!” Ryuho declared. “You didn’t do anything wrong! Not a single thing! The people who do bad stuff are the ones to blame!” As Ryuho hugged Angelina with all his might, her face sank deeper into his warm chest. “I’m here because you saved me, Lina! I’m here because you were born! If you hadn’t been born, I wouldn’t be here right now!”

Ryuho's breathing grew ragged as he continued yelling.

"Ryuho..." Angelina mumbled, squeezing his rising and falling back in her arms.

"So don't say stuff like that. Don't say you shouldn't have been born. If you say that, I'll... I'll—"

Ryuho burst into tears.

Angelina was so stunned that she had difficulty knowing what to say. "Please don't cry, Ryuho."

"You're the one who made me cry," Ryuho scolded her through his sobbing. "If you weren't here... If I searched the entire world and couldn't find you, then I would... Then I would—"

He couldn't imagine a world in which Angelina hadn't been born. After all, he'd decided they would be together forever and ever.

"Then I would die of loneliness!" he howled plaintively.

"I'm sorry, Ryuho!" Angelina cried. "I'm really sorry!"

His wailing caused her chest to ache. *I never knew anyone would be this sad if I disappeared*, she thought.

"Sorry won't cut it!" Ryuho shouted. "Stop saying weird stuff! I hate it!"

"I'm sorry, Ryuho. I'll stop talking like that."

"Is that a promise?"

Angelina nodded. "It's a promise!"

"And no takesies-backsies?"

"No takesies-backsies!"

"You better pinky promise then," Ryuho said, gazing at Angelina while sniffling. "And I won't be your friend anymore if you break it!"

Angelina held out her little finger. "Yeah, it's a pinky promise."

When the two children wrapped their little fingers together, Feilong regarded them with an envious expression, as he had no friends. Noticing that, Tomi

patted him on the back.

“Uncle Tomi, where’s Mommy...?” Feilong asked.

Tomi jolted in surprise. Though Feilong’s memories had reverted back to his childhood, his mother had died a long time ago. Tomi couldn’t decide if he should thrust this cruel reality onto a child.

“Ryoui left on a short trip,” he finally answered. “You’ll be staying here in the meantime.”

Angelina and Ryuho looked up at Tomi, who seemed rather troubled.

That’s right—I’m not the only one who’s feeling uneasy, Angelina thought. Father is in a much tougher position than me. He might have forgotten I’m his daughter, but he’s still my father. After wiping away her tears, she raised her head and squared her shoulders. More importantly, he sacrificed himself to save me from that magic. So this time, I’ll be the one to save Father!

Angelina took a deep breath and steeled herself. “Mishter Prime Minister,” she said.

Tomi bent his knees while holding Feilong.

“L’il Feilong,” Angelina continued while smiling at him. “Would you please be friends with me?”

“Friends...?” the boy repeated, blinking in surprise. While staring back at Angelina, he noticed the rainbow luster sparkling in the depths of her eyes, causing him to gasp. “Are you my older sister by any chance?”

The rainbow luster was proof that someone belonged to the royal line.

Angelina smiled and showed Feilong a glimpse of her Inverted Scale, neither confirming nor denying their relationship. Since Feilong had reverted back to his childhood, he had neither the scale nor the scars from attempting to tear it out. He was still a toddler, ignorant of despair.

“Princess?” Feilong asked.

“Please call me Angelina.”

“And I’m Ryuho—Lina’s best friend!”

Feilong looked at Tomi with a troubled expression. Members of the royal family hardly ever interacted with their half-siblings. They shared no brotherly or sisterly warmth, as they were essentially rivals.

“Feel free to call them by their names,” Tomi responded with a smile.

Feilong cocked his head hesitantly. “...Lina and Ryuho?”

The sheer cuteness of Feilong’s apprehensiveness caused Angelina’s heart to skip a beat. As a man, he always presented himself as powerfully majestic, but now, he was just a helpless child. Angelina could sense his humanity in this brand-new side of him. He seemed more of a kindred spirit than ever before.

“It’s nice to meet you, L’il Feilong,” Angelina said with a smile.

The boy responded with an awkward nod.



A gag order had been placed on Feilong reverting back to a child. According to the official announcement, the emperor was taking an extended rest. In the meantime, Kyril and Tomi would be taking over his official duties.

“Did you find out anything?” Kyril asked. He addressed this question to Yuen, who’d been interrogating the traveling performers.

Yuen shook his head impassively. “They insist that the troupe leader was acting alone.”

“That’s hard to believe.”

“According to the performers, the Yulan people have been blessed ever since Princess Angelina was acknowledged as an heir to the throne. No one would try to harm her. On the contrary, they revere her.”

Kyril nodded. Ever since Angelina became the imperial princess, Yulan culture received preferential treatment in an attempt to restore it within Jinlong. The empire was summoning back nomadic Yulans to promote their culture and technology. Certainly, their grudge against Jinlong wouldn’t disappear overnight. At the same time, directing that enmity towards Angelina made no sense.

“The performers are just as confused as us,” Yuen said. “They have no idea

why their leader would attack Princess Angelina.”

“But attacking my father would be a different matter, I assume?” Kyril asked.

Yuen cleared his throat. Kyril had hit the nail on the head.

“From their perspective, both you and Princess Angelina are the last remaining members of Yulan royalty,” Yuen explained. “As Phaenna’s posthumous children, you represent hope for rebuilding Yule.”

“Indeed. I can’t fathom what the troupe leader was thinking. And after Father rebounded his magic, he turned into a wooden doll...”

“People often die from magical rebounds, but I’ve never heard of a corpse turning into a wooden doll.”

“How he transformed gives me pause,” Kyril mumbled. “It’s as if what we believed to be his living form was the real illusion all along.”

Yuen’s head shot up. “You might be onto something, Your Highness.”

“What do you mean?”

“Perhaps the troupe leader himself was being operated by magic, as you suggested.”

“Could you expand on that thought?” Kyril asked.

“If he *returned* to being a wooden doll after having time-reversal magic reflected back on him, perhaps he was never human to begin with.”

“Have you tracked his movements before coming here?”

Yuen nodded. “I haven’t confirmed the details, but the troupe returned to Yule for the first time in a long while, around half a year ago. They did this for the sake of one member who was growing homesick in his old age.”

“I see...”

“When the aged member remained in a forest near Yule, a new member joined their troupe. That new member became the leader.”

Kyril furrowed his brow. “A new member became the troupe leader?”

“That’s correct. They recognized his leadership skills since he was a better

singer and more beautiful than anyone else in the troupe. On top of devising new performances, he also possessed rare barrel organ sheet music.”

“You’re talking about the sheet music that could be played backward?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Yuen confirmed.

“Was he already targeting Angelina half a year ago...?” Kyril asked with a heavy sigh.

Yuen nodded again. “Investigating that sheet music seems like our best course of action.”

“Unfortunately, it seems to have disappeared when the magic activated.”

When Yuen gave no immediate response, Kyril bit his lip, frustrated.

“As a secondary measure, I’m having Junshi investigate the other sheet music and the barrel organ,” Yuen said. “There are Yulan characters engraved on the instrument. Hopefully, those will provide us with some sort of clue.”

“I’ll go read those myself,” Kyril replied.

Yuen shook his head. “That would be too dangerous. If the troupe leader was targeting the remaining Yulan royal family, that barrel organ might cause you harm, Your Highness. I’ll have Junshi copy the writing for you.”

“I see,” Kyril answered with a nod. “You think I might be in danger as well.”

“Precisely. You’re Empress Phaenna’s posthumous child as well.”

Kyril heaved another deep sigh. “Then why did Lina have to be the target of his assault...?”

Kyril pictured his mother absentmindedly. She’d been a kind and gentle woman. He could still remember her warmth and her loving gaze.

I don’t think Mother did anything to earn the enmity of the Yulan people, he thought. Lina couldn’t have done so either. Most people didn’t even know about her until just recently.

No matter how hard Kyril thought, he couldn’t come up with an answer.

“Lina should take a break from school until Father returns to normal,” he said.

“I agree,” Yuen answered. “Since we don’t know the enemy’s end goal, prioritizing her safety comes first.”

Kybil and Yuen both nodded in agreement.



FEILONG had begun living in the North Star Sanctuary as Angelina and Kybil’s little brother. Despite being a son of the emperor, he and his mother had only been allocated a small home in the Canopy. They’d practically lived in hiding as a single mother and only child.

Of course, Feilong had never eaten at a dinner table with other family members. Likewise, he’d never slept in a lavish bed with his siblings. Those experiences perplexed and surprised him, but at the same time, he also felt happy. At first, he’d been scared that his father would scold him upon hearing about it. As such, he’d been somewhat relieved to hear that his father was also absent.

But where’s Mommy? Feilong wondered. *If she could join us at the dinner table, everything would be perfect.* He imagined his mother taking part in their delightful family dinners. *Stop,* he told himself, shaking his head to clear away the thought. *I shouldn’t wish for anything more.*

Feilong looked up at the sky vacantly from the garden outside Kybil’s room. Tomi stood next to him. The prime minister had entrusted his daily affairs to Yuen so that he could take care of Feilong.

Angelina sneaked up behind the downcast-looking Feilong and covered his eyes with her hands.

“Stop!” he shouted. “Who is that?!”

His excessive surprise caused Angelina’s heart to ache. Due to being hurt in the past, he was abnormally afraid of human contact, just as Angelina had once been.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “It’s me—your big sister.”

“Oh, Lina,” Feilong replied, his shoulders slumping. “Sorry for yelling...”

An awkward air settled over them. Angelina didn’t know how to act in times

like these. Oblivious to the situation, Ryuho plopped between them in his feline form.

“What are you two doing?” he asked.

His nonchalant tone was a saving grace for Angelina. At the same time, his soft fur warmed Feilong’s heart.

“You’re so fluffy, Ryuho!” Angelina cried, ruffling the fur around his neck.

Ryuho purred and nuzzled his jaw against Angelina, demanding her to continue. Feilong regarded them enviously, and upon noticing this, Ryuho breathed a quiet sigh.

“Listen here,” he said pompously. “If you don’t overdo it, you can pet my back. But just my back, okay?”

As Feilong’s expression brightened, Ryuho stretched out on the ground with his back facing the boy. Nevertheless, Feilong stood back hesitantly. He wasn’t sure what to do, as he’d never petted a tiger before.

Angelina acted as an example. “Here’s what you do,” she said, stroking Ryuho’s fur in the direction it flowed. The Flame Tiger responded with a purr.

Feilong extended the fingers of his small hand and began stroking Ryuho’s back as well. The tiger’s warm, fluffy coat smelled like the sun.

Ryuho’s eyes narrowed blissfully. “See—you can do it.”

“Does that feel nice, Ryuho?” Angelina asked while continuing to stroke his back.

“Yeah, it feels all right, I guess.”

In contrast to his words, his tail swayed left and right, slapping against the ground in high spirits.

Angelina nuzzled her cheek against Ryuho’s back and ruffled his fur. “I’m glad it feels nice.”

When Angelina smiled at Feilong, he grinned back at her. It was a childlike expression. He wasn’t afraid or attempting to read the faces of those around him.

"I feel good, too," Feilong mumbled, also burying his face in Ryuho's back.

And so, the children passed the time together in amicable harmony.

By rights, Emperor Feilong should have been able to experience this kind of childhood as well, Tomi thought while gazing at the three children. When he remembered his little sister Ryoui, his chest ached.

"Can you throw a ball, Feilong?" Ryuho asked.

"I think so," the boy replied.

"I love playing catch. You should join us!"

After saying this, Ryuho shot to his feet. Since Angelina and Feilong had been leaning on his back, they were both tossed to the ground. The two children looked at each other and shared a laugh.

"You startled us, Ryuho!" Angelina cried.

"Oops, sorry about that."

As the children squealed with delight, bull-headed shrikes chirped competitively to mark their territory. Ryuho pressed his two front paws into the ground and stretched his back. Tomi regarded the eager-to-play Flame Tiger with a warm smile.

I wanted His Majesty to experience this when he was a child, the prime minister thought. *Now, Princess Angelina is giving it to him.*

Feilong's childhood had been far from peaceful. The families of the other consorts had sought to assassinate him, and his father had treated him with disdain. Though Tomi had done his best to protect Feilong, the boy's life had been the opposite of stable.

"Throw the ball to me too, Lina!" Feilong shouted.

"Here it comes!" Angelina called back, tossing the ball to him using a gentle, underhanded throw.

Even so, Feilong didn't catch it. In a flash, he and Ryuho chased after the rolling ball together. Watching Feilong cry out in delight and frolic around with a Flame Tiger warmed Tomi's heart.

This is the first time I've ever seen His Majesty laugh like that, he thought.

As the game continued, Feilong looked at Angelina with guileless eyes. "Toss me the ball!" he pestered her in a carefree tone.

Angelina's heart broke. Father has never asked me for anything with such sincerity in his eyes, she thought. His eyes always have a smidge of guilt mixed in them. But things are different now. Is he able to look so happy because he doesn't remember me? He really has forgotten everything...

Realization washed over Angelina as she observed Feilong's happiness. His small body held no memories of her. He didn't remember anything painful, yet at the same time, he'd even forgotten the happy days.

Have you really forgotten me, Father? Angelina wondered. Can you really not remember anything? I want you to get your memories back as soon as possible.

Feilong had often tried to intuit Angelina's mood when he'd picked her up by force. Likewise, he'd tried to read her expression when giving her misguided gifts. Angelina had never disliked her bumbling father. Regardless, she'd rarely ever allowed herself to be happy. For some reason, she tended to adopt a somewhat cold demeanor. Despite knowing how much Feilong loved her now, she couldn't forget his past contempt. A piece of her heart hadn't been able to forgive him.

But when I look back on it, I should've told him I loved him, Angelina thought. Maybe then, he wouldn't have forgotten me.

"What's wrong, Lina?" young Feilong asked while cocking his head.

Ryuho cocked his head as well.

Angelina squeezed both of them in her arms. "No, it's nothing. I love you two."

Ryuho gave her a big, wet lick on the cheek, and Feilong hugged her back just as tightly.

He hugs me without hesitation, unlike when he was my father, Angelina thought. Her chest tightened as he poured all his love into that embrace. Will he hug me like this when he remembers everything? I sure hope he does.

Thus, Angelina squeezed her arms around the two boys even tighter.



KYRIL was racking his brain in the Celestial Axe Tower. Two weeks had passed since Feilong's rest had begun. Disquieting rumors were already circulating around the palace. He'd never taken leave from his job until now, as he'd never been sick or injured. As a result, his sudden need for rest seemed all too sudden. What's more, those words hadn't come from Feilong himself.

Palace residents began speculating among themselves in hushed tones.

"What happened to His Majesty...?"

"Is he feeling under the weather, perhaps?"

"No one has seen Prime Minister Tomi recently either."

It was unnatural for Feilong to not even show his face, regardless of any ill health. Though Crown Prince Kyril had taken over governmental affairs for the present, the people were worried about his ability to respond to a crisis. Yes, he was known for being capable, but all the same, he was still thirteen and untested in battle.

The concerned whispers grew even louder.

"Just when we finally reached an armistice with Anda..."

"I'm worried about those western barbarians."

"The rural clans are acting restless as well."

The courtiers fell silent and looked away upon seeing Kyril.

I need to solve this problem as soon as possible, he thought, panic stirring in his chest.

Despite his efforts to decipher the Yulan text copied from the barrel organ, he couldn't find any clues about the magic. He couldn't glean anything from talking to the traveling performers either.

Kyril could do very little between the mountain of work he'd inherited. Some nobles and bureaucrats were taking advantage of the cruel emperor's absence by attempting to throw Kyril off balance. Even worse, eagle-eyed monarchs and

feudal lords of minority groups were watching for opportunities to claim independence. Skirmishes seemed liable to break out near the empire's borders at any moment. Clearly, Kyril was being underestimated due to his youth.

If Mother were here right now, then maybe...

Kyril opened the door to his room as that thought crossed his mind. The room contained three beds belonging to him, Angelina, and Ryuho. Until now, the three of them had slept side-by-side in Kyril's bed. Tonight, however, Feilong had taken Kyril's place. Upon seeing this, Kyril breathed a sigh of relief.

How will Father react if he returns to normal and remembers this? he wondered.

Before Feilong had turned into a child, he and Ryuho had constantly been at each other's throats. Feilong had always lost his composure in matters concerning his daughter. As such, he'd always competed with Ryuho, his jealousy on full display.

When Kyril chuckled, Angelina sat up in bed. Ryuho's ears twitched in response to her movement.

"Big Brudder," Angelina said, hopping off the bed and toddling over to him.

Kyril scooped up Angelina in his arms. He hadn't been able to play with her often as of late, as he'd been holed up in his office.

"Are you busy, Big Brudder?" Angelina asked.

"Yes, a bit."

Angelina's azure eyes watered as she peered at him. "When will we be able to sleep in the same bed again?"

Those words shook Kyril to his core. "...We'll have to be a little patient until Father returns to normal," he answered with a vague smile.

Angelina hung her head. "I want to help, too," she insisted, squeezing Kyril in her arms.

As a small girl, she probably couldn't help with his office work. Even so, being unable to do anything was vexing. Kyril was a child, too, after all. Regardless, he had to investigate the magic cast on Feilong and manage government affairs at

the same time. Though he was still eating meals with everyone, he went to sleep late and left early in the mornings.

“Lina,” Kyril said.

“I want to help you and Fodder, not just be protected,” she replied while still embracing Kyril. “We’re family, aren’t we?”

Kyril gasped. He’d vowed to resolve this situation himself to avoid worrying Angelina. However, perhaps he should have relied on her more as family.

“I’m sorry, Lina,” Kyril apologized while patting her head. “I didn’t want to worry you, but it seems like I just made you more uneasy.” When his little sister nuzzled her forehead against him, he continued, “Would you mind researching how to dispel the magic? You can do so when Father takes his afternoon nap.”

Angelina nodded emphatically. “Of course!”

As Kyril continued patting her on the head, relief washed over Angelina, prompting her to yawn loudly.

“Go to sleep soon, okay?” Angelina urged.

Kyril placed his sleepy sister back on his bed. Since the mattress probably couldn’t accommodate a fourth person, he tried heading towards Angelina’s bed.

“Stay with us...” Angelina mumbled while half asleep, not letting go of Kyril’s shirt.

“There’s not enough room for me, Lina,” Kyril answered with a bemused smile.

Ryuho stood up and moved over to Angelina’s bed. Though he didn’t say anything, he was giving up his spot next to Angelina to an overworked Kyril.

“Thank you, Ryuho,” Kyril said.

Ryuho merely wagged his tail and curled up into a ball. Meanwhile, Kyril lay down next to Angelina, who’d already fallen asleep.

What a strange feeling, Kyril thought. If not for this disaster, sleeping in the same bed as Father would have been unthinkable.

As a general rule, the Jinlongian royal family entrusted their children to wet nurses rather than raising them personally. However, Phaenna had raised Kyril herself, as she hadn't been a slave to the empire's customs. As a child, Kyril had slept in the same bed as his mother, although his father had never joined them.

Kyril readjusted the covers over his tiny father. Feilong's peaceful sleeping face somewhat resembled Angelina's. Kyril found him quite adorable.

Just then, Angelina let out a long breath. She must have fallen into a deep sleep. Though panic and unease had overwhelmed Kyril until mere moments ago, a sense of relief now spread through his chest. As that strange feeling enveloped him, he pulled the covers over himself. When his mother appeared in his dream, she embraced the tiny Feilong and smiled at Kyril.

"Don't worry, Kyril," she said. "You and Lina have each other."

Chapter 4: Angelina and the Bai Ze

ANGELINA was visiting the North Star Sanctuary's library with Ryuho in his feline form. They were researching a possible method of returning Feilong to normal. Kyril had been investigating Yulan texts, but unfortunately, few such documents remained in Jinlong. That said, Yule must have possessed some unique forms of magic, as sorcery had once flourished there.

"Do you know anything about all this, Mishter Dragon?" Angelina asked.

"Much of Jinlong's magic was passed down from Yule in the distant past," the Golden Dragon replied. "A great deal of that magic was probably lost while being transmitted. Moreover, if there were secret arts passed down solely through the Yulan royal family, I know nothing of them."

When the dragon glanced at Angelina's right hand, she looked down at her palm. At the beginning of each time loop, another mark resembling a flower petal appeared on her skin.

Speaking of which, I've heard the Tianshi's Protective Seal is a Yulan charm, she thought. *Is there a reason why the marks on my palm resemble that seal?* Angelina closed and opened her hand. Nevertheless, she was unable to discern the reason behind its shape.

"You may have to ask the Bai Ze," the Golden Dragon suggested.

"The Bai Ze...?" Angelina repeated.

"Yes. He's a knowledgeable holy beast who lives on Mt. Jinlong."

"Can you take me to meet him, Mishter Dragon?"

"I can take you as far as Mt. Jinlong, but I'm not certain you'll be able to meet him."

"How come?" Angelina asked.

"The Bai Ze only appears before highly virtuous leaders. No one has seen him for a very long time."

“That doesn’t sound good...”

“And though it vexes me to admit this, I am Feilong’s... or rather, the royal family’s guardian deity,” the dragon said. “The last two emperors committed patricide on my watch, which the Bai Ze will not think well of. He probably won’t appear if I’m with you.”

Angelina slumped her shoulders in disappointment. *If the Bai Ze only appears before virtuous heads of state, there’s no guarantee we’ll meet him even if we visit Mt. Jinlong*, she thought. *It could be a waste of time when we’re already fighting the clock. Kyril might be able to meet him, but he can’t leave the Purple Forbidden Palace while Father’s still a child. I can’t think of any other solutions, though. What should I do...?*

Frustrated, Angelina balled her hand into a fist.

“Hey, what’s a virtuous leader of state?” Ryuho asked.

“A king who does nothing evil, I suppose,” the dragon replied.

Ryuho’s face lit up. “Then let’s go together, Lina!” he cried, grabbing her fist with a smile as radiant as the sun.

“Even though he might not appear to us...?” Angelina asked.

“Believe me—I’m gonna become a king who doesn’t do anything evil. Neither of us has killed our parents either! And if there’s no other solution, why overthink it?”

“Ryuho...”

“Don’t worry about it, Lina!” Ryuho shouted. “You’re a good kid, and so am I! If the Bai Ze doesn’t know that, then he’s probably not very smart in the first place.”

The Golden Dragon burst out laughing. “Ha, well said! You make a fair point, Ryuho. I’ll take both of you to Mt. Jinlong, and you can brave the rest of the journey on your own.”

Afterward, the Golden Dragon explained the plan to Kyril and the others. Of course, Kyril opposed the idea at first, but he couldn’t think of any other solution. More and more people were requesting an audience with Feilong

daily. Even worse, small conflicts had started breaking out on the empire's borders. They couldn't put off these problems. In the end, Kyril had no choice but to reluctantly accept the plan. Thus, it was decided that Angelina and Ryuho would visit Mt. Jinlong.

Angelina wore gloves, a hat, a scarf, and a fluffy coat with a hood. She looked as round as a Daruma doll. Not only were her clothes of the highest quality, but they also had protective magic cast on them.

A sturdy basket woven from wisteria vines was on the Golden Dragon's side. It resembled a hot air balloon basket and was large enough for Angelina and Ryuho to ride in. Plenty of blankets with protective magic cast on them had been spread out in the basket as well. Kyril had prepared them, as he was worried about Angelina traveling a long distance on the Golden Dragon.

Normally, Kyril would have wanted to make the journey in Angelina's stead. However, he couldn't leave the palace unattended when former nobles and enemy nations were seeking to usurp the emperor's throne. Still worried to death, he'd provided Angelina with the most complete, nigh overprotective defenses.

"I'm leaving Lina in your hands, Ryuho," Kyril said.

Ryuho wagged his tail in his feline form. "You can count on me!"

"We'll be back soon, Big Brudder!" Angelina cried.

And so, Kyril watched them leave with a worried expression.

The Golden Dragon took to the skies while carrying the basket. He flew slower and at a much lower elevation than when he'd taken Feilong to Mt. Jinlong. Temperatures dropped, and the air grew thinner as elevation increased. As such, the dragon was showing consideration for Angelina's frail body.

Angelina buried herself in Ryuho's fur while wrapped in her snug clothes. The wind roared as they soared across the sky. Though the buoyant feeling of riding in a basket caused Angelina a small spike of anxiety, being with Ryuho helped relieve her worries. She pressed her face into the Flame Tiger, whose warm coat smelled like the sun.

"I feel like I can go anywhere with you by my side!" Angelina exclaimed.

Ryuho laughed. “I feel the same way!”

The pair squeezed each other in their arms.

Before long, they reached the peak of Mt. Jinlong. The Golden Dragon gently placed the basket in front of the Starlight Mausoleum.

The daoshi of the Heavenly Sovereign Temple fell into a panic. Not too long ago, the Golden Dragon had shot lightning at them. Angelina couldn’t blame them for worrying about what might happen this time.

Ryuho popped his face out of the basket, followed by Angelina. When the daoshi saw the princess in her fluffy coat, the tension drained from their bodies at the heartwarming sight.

“Polaris Princess!” one of the women cried while racing over to the basket.
“What in the world is going on?!”

Ryuho jumped out of the basket with Angelina on his back.

“I want to meet Mishter Bai Ze,” she explained.

The daoshi exchanged glances. “You mean the legendary holy beast?” one of them asked.

“Yep. Do you know where he is?”

The daoshi shook their heads. “I’ve never heard of anyone going to meet the Bai Ze,” one of them replied. “To my knowledge, he only appears before rulers that he’s deemed worthy.”

“But I really need Mishter Bai Ze’s wisdom.”

“Unfortunately, not even the old texts in our library contain information on his whereabouts...”

Both Angelina and the daoshi were utterly perplexed. At that moment, a young girl appeared, along with the sound of a chirping bird. The High Priestess Kalavinka had appeared with the Garuda resting on her shoulder. She wore her hair in a tight bun, and the Tianshi’s Protective Seal had been painted on her forehead in blue ink.

“Purity and fortune,” the Kalavinka said.

“Nara!” Angelina squealed in delight.

A faint blush crept up the Kalavinka’s cheeks. Nara was her real name. Though she’d abandoned it to live as the high priestess, Angelina addressed her as a friend, not a living goddess.

“Hello, Angelina,” the Kalavinka said. She also addressed the princess by name to show mutual friendship. Suddenly, the Garuda let forth a trilling chirp from atop the Kalavinka’s shoulder. “Oh, my companion is saying something,” the high priestess noted.

Angelina looked at Garuda. Only she could understand the holy avian’s words.

“Polaris Princess Angelina,” the Garuda said. “I will guide you from here.”

“You know Mishter Bai Ze, Mish Garuda?” Angelina asked.

“Yes. I can let you down near his dwelling place. Alas, I cannot guarantee that you will be able to meet him.”

Angelina bowed her head deeply. “Please do!”

“In that case, ask Nara to sing a celebratory song and share a portion of your divine power with me.”

“My divine power?”

“That’s right,” the Garuda answered. “Pat me with your right hand, which is infused with divine power. Usually, a powerful wish from the Kalavinka causes me to grow larger. Sadly, she has no such wish right now, and thus, we must use the divine power of the Polaris Princess.”

“Do I really have divine power?” Angelina asked while looking at her right hand. Apart from the Tianshi’s Protective Seal, it was a normal—albeit very small—hand.

“You do,” Ryuho answered decisively.

Angelina nodded. “And even if I don’t have divine power, this is to save Fodder! I have to try!” She balled her hand into a fist in a show of resolve. At that moment, wisps of light drifted out from between her fingers.

The Garuda had to squint while examining the effulgent light. “That is your

divine power.”

“Nara,” Angelina said. “No, Mish Kalavinka. Please sing a celebratory song to the Garuda. She’s going to take me to Mishter Bai Ze.”

The Kalavinka nodded and took a deep breath. Before long, her song resounded throughout the frigid air of Mt. Jinlong. The lyrics, composed in ancient Jinlongian, celebrated the joy of life. The high priestess’s singing voice shook the trees, and the light filtering through the leaves illuminated the earth. As butterflies fluttered in the air, birds started to sing along with her.

“Amazing!” Angelina cried. “This is a celebratory song.”

The high priestess’s strength overwhelmed her. As such, the princess hardened her resolve as well.

“Please take me to meet Mishter Bai Ze, Mish Garuda!” Angelina cried, stroking the divine avian with her shining right hand.

The Garuda leaned into her touch, seeming to enjoy it. The light of divine power enveloped the divine avian, and she rapidly grew larger. After reaching her full size, the Garuda spread her wings to their full span.

“Incredible!” multiple daoshi cheered in unison.

The Garuda presented her back to Angelina. After placing Angelina on his own back, Ryuho hopped aboard the Garuda. With a shrill chirp, the divine avian soared upwards. All the while, the Kalavinka’s voice resounded across the frigid, blue sky. While responding with her own song, the Garuda circled the permanently snowy mountain and pierced the clouds.

As the divine avian grew increasingly distant, the Kalavinka squinted while looking at the sky. *Please take Angelina to see the Bai Ze, Holy Garuda*, she thought. Infused with that prayer, her celebratory song turned into light and rained down upon the earth.



THE Garuda flew through a crimson cloud with Angelina and Ryuho on her back. The strange scenery seemed nothing like the upper air of Mt. Jinlong, for it was warm and soundless. A little while later, two Vermillion Birds circled the

Garuda. Based on their different sizes, they appeared to be mother and child.

“Are you Mish Vermillion Bird from the Naming Trial?” Angelina asked.

The mother responded with a squawk, and something dropped from her beak. The object fit snugly onto Angelina’s head like a hat. Flustered, Angelina reached up to touch the object. It was as smooth as porcelain and had a solid yet gently curved surface.

“What’s this?” she asked.

Though she tried to look up at the Vermillion Birds again, they’d already disappeared into the clouds. In their place, a Phoenix appeared.

“That is the shell of the Vermillion Bird’s egg,” the Phoenix said. “You’ve been recognized as a godmother, Lina.”

“Your voice!” Angelina cried, tears spilling from her eyes. “Are you Mish Wicker Cabinet Princess?”

According to legend, a former princess had once been imprisoned in the storage shed. In the end, she’d suffered an untimely death. Angelina had freed the princess, and she now freely soared around the heavens as a Phoenix.

“Please wear that eggshell to your destination,” the Phoenix said. “It will surely be of help to you.”

When the Phoenix beat her wings, a rift formed in the crimson clouds. A dense, black forest spread out below them, and the Garuda descended towards it.

“Thank you so much, Mish Vermillion Bird!” Angelina called out, waving at the crimson clouds enthusiastically. “And you too, Mish Princess!”

The Phoenix waved back with her tail feathers. As she did so, rainbow light particles similar to iridescent scales rained down upon the forest, glittering all the while. The forest began turning green where the light particles fell as if the season was changing from winter to spring. Angelina’s eyes widened at the beautiful sight.

“That’s crazy awesome,” Ryuho said.

“Yeah!” Angelina agreed. “So pretty!”

The Garuda continued descending towards the forest. After alighting before a briar hedge, she said to Angelina, "This is the entrance."

Both Angelina and Ryuho dismounted the Garuda. The dense briar cut off their path forward like a barricade. Angelina couldn't even spot an animal trail. She could practically hear the unyielding will of the briar hedge telling her, "You shall not pass."

"This is as far as I can take you," the Garuda said. "Only those recognized by the Bai Ze can advance further."

Angelina gulped back her anxiety and nodded. "Thank you so much. I'll do my best, Mish Garuda!"

When Angelina pumped her fist, the Garuda let out a cheerful laugh. "I'm sure you'll be able to meet him."

That said, the divine avian took to the skies again. Angelina and Ryuho watched her beautiful form fade into the distance. Once she was out of sight, they turned to face the briar hedge. Thick, glossy leaves grew luxuriously from the thorny branches. Those branches overflowed with a vibrant lifeforce, appearing too hard to break.

"Is there someplace we can enter from?" Angelina asked, grazing a finger against one of the green leaves. "I want to meet Mishter Bai Ze."

"I'll burn all this briar to the ground!" Ryuho shouted.

When the briar quivered in response, Angelina threw her arms around Ryuho to stop him. "Don't do it, Ryuho! It would make me sad if you hurt the briar."

Ryuho cocked his head, not seeming to understand. "It would make you sad?"

"Yeah, it would."

"Okay, I won't burn it down then!"

After breathing a sigh of relief, Angelina turned to face the briar. "But we still need to pass through here. Could you bend just enough to let us through, Mishter Briar?"

Angelina folded her hands together and bowed to the briar. At that moment, a dim light radiated from her hands. In response, the barricade of briar parted

just enough to let her pass, revealing a narrow animal trail.

“You’re letting me through?” Angelina asked.

A small green bud popped up on one of the nearby branches to provide confirmation.

“Hop on,” Ryuho said, presenting his back to Angelina.

“Okay!”

Once Angelina had seated herself on Ryuho’s back, he forced his way down the road, which had briar patches on either side. The path was too narrow for him, as it had only opened up wide enough for Angelina. Thus, the thorny branches tormented him from either side, attempting to push him away.

“Doesn’t that hurt, Ryuho?” Angelina asked, trying to scramble off his back. “I’ll go by myself.”

“It’s fine—I’m going with you!” Ryuho shot back, doing his best to act aloof. “This isn’t nearly enough to hurt a Flame Tiger!”

“But you’re bleeding...”

The briar that barred the path to the Bai Ze was sharp enough to wound even a Flame Tiger.

“I won’t leave your side over something this small!” Ryuho shouted, his tail flicking back and forth angrily. “I don’t back down to bullies!”

Angelina clung to Ryuho with all her might and ruffled his fur. His coat began radiating light, and the wounds inflicted by the briar disappeared within a moment.

“See?” Ryuho said with a triumphant laugh. “I’ll be fine as long as you heal me!”

That didn’t alleviate the ache in Angelina’s chest. Ryuho would still have to experience the initial pain, regardless of whether she could heal him.

“I hate seeing you get even a little hurt...” she mumbled.

As tears spilled from her azure eyes and sank into the ground, the briar rustled and parted even wider. The path was now broad enough for a Flame

Tiger to pass through safely.

“Thank you so much, Mishter Briar!” Angelina cried, her face lighting up.

While the briar leaves waved back to her in a fluttering motion, Ryuho began marching down the road. They couldn’t see far ahead since the road was full of twists and turns. Furthermore, the briar closed behind them as they advanced. Angelina quivered when she saw that. There was no turning back from here on out.

“Black bear walking down the road!” Ryuho began singing loudly, hoping to encourage her.

“Clap, clap, clap!” Angelina sang along.

Relief washed over Ryuho when he heard her lively voice. He didn’t want her to be afraid.

I’m not afraid of anything when I’m with Lina! Ryuho thought. That’s why I have to protect her!

As Ryuho wagged his tail and continued walking, a small bronze door appeared in front of them. A depiction of the Blue Dragon was engraved on its surface. Ryuho tried shoving his head against the door, but even a Flame Tiger’s strength couldn’t open it despite its small appearance.

“Must be locked,” Ryuho said, his face scrunching up in irritation.

“How do you think it opens?” Angelina asked.

The pair stared at the bronze door intently, and after a while, Ryuho tried ramming his body into it. At that moment, hail rained from the sky, clattering here and there as it struck the earth.

“Whoa!” Ryuho shouted.

“Eep!” Angelina squealed.

As Angelina scrambled to shield Ryuho, he also threw his forepaws around her. Just then, a piece of hail whacked her eggshell helmet.

Bristling, Ryuho unleashed a jet of fire up at the sky. “Cut the crap!” he shouted. “If you hurt Lina, it’s over for you! I’ll burn the sky to a crisp, and it’ll

never be able to rain again!"

The hail stopped falling at once. Perhaps Ryuho's yelling had startled it. In any case, Angelina looked up at the sky timidly. As she did so, her eggshell helmet split open with a crack.

"Oh no!" Angelina yelped.

The eggshell fragments transformed into three long-tailed lizards, which scurried away and disappeared into the briar thicket.

"Did Mish Vermillion Bird save me?" Angelina asked, exchanging a glance with Ryuho.

"Yeah, I think so!" he replied.

Afterward, they turned to face the bronze door. The words "Capture the dragon" were engraved upon the depiction of the Blue Dragon.

"What does it mean?" Angelina asked.

Ryuho furrowed his brow. "Is it a riddle? I have no idea what to do..."

As both children cocked their heads, the three long-tailed lizards returned from the briar. Each one was carrying something in its mouth. After placing those objects in front of Angelina, they scurried into the thicket again.

"Am I supposed to choose one of these?" Angelina asked, examining the objects carefully. First was a pagoda tree branch bearing fruit, flowers, and buds. Second was an ornamental hairpin made from bamboo. Third was a silver tally in the shape of a sleeping cat. When Angelina looked at the door closely, she found three holes in which the objects would fit.

"I've got it!" Ryuho shouted.

"What do you mean?" Angelina asked.

"It's a riddle—just like I thought! And the answer's gotta be the hairpin!"

"How come?"

"It's made from bamboo, right? To write the Jinlongian character for 'basket,' you draw the bamboo radical over the dragon radical! If you imagine using a bamboo basket to capture a dragon, you'll always remember that character!"

Junshi taught me that the other day!"

"That's amazing, Ryuho! You've been working hard on your studies."

"Yeah, I'm amazing!" Ryuho cried out, wagging his tail and grinning smugly. "I'm the king of studying!"

Angelina stuck the bamboo hairpin into the bronze door. Shortly thereafter, the door creaked open of its own accord. Unlike before, the briar path beyond the portal was broad enough for two people to walk down. Ryuho wouldn't have to worry about getting stuck by thorns any longer. As such, he transformed into a human and took Angelina's hand.

"We did it, Lina!" Ryuho cheered, swelling with satisfaction. "And this is pretty fun! Will we need to use these objects? Let's take 'em with us!"

Angelina picked up the pagoda tree branch, and Ryuho picked up the silver tally. Then, they dashed forward to solve the next riddle.

"It's here, Lina!" Ryuho shouted.

They stopped before an iron door with a depiction of the Black Tortoise engraved upon it. The words "Insert your gift to the emperor" were also etched into the door.

Angelina cocked her head. "My present to Fodder? What could that be...?"

The silver tally was magnificent and seemed deeply connected to the imperial family. Conversely, the withered pagoda tree branch was the shabbiest of the objects.

Ryuho held out the silver tally in his hand to Angelina. "This one's the nicest, don'tcha think?"

In response, the snake coiled around the Black Tortoise spun around three times.

"Three times..." Angelina mumbled, considering the matter intently. "Is that some kind of hint?"

Ryuho pointed to the pagoda tree branch in Angelina's hand. "There are three things attached to that branch. Could it be referring to the flowers, fruit, and buds?"

“Flowers, fruits, and buds...” Angelina repeated. “Oh, wait! The Three Ducal Ministers are related to the pagoda tree, too!”

Ryuho furrowed his brow. “What are the Three Ducal Ministers?”

“A long time ago, three pagoda trees were planted in a garden, and the Three Ducal Ministers had chairs made from them. We learned that from Junshi, remember? Those ministers are sometimes called the Three Pagoda Trees.”

“Oh, yeah! Those are the three great ministers who serve the emperor, right?”

“Exactly,” Angelina confirmed. “And I think this might be a rod, not a branch.”

“I think you might be onto something! If you place the tree radical next to the character meaning ‘to present,’ it becomes the character for rod!”

Encouraged by Ryuho’s words, Angelina placed the branch in the Black Tortoise’s mouth. Without delay, the iron door rumbled open. Thus, Angelina and Ryuho headed towards the next door. After continuing down the briar road, they arrived at a small shrine with a silver door. The door had been decorated with something like an astrological chart containing depictions of the four deities. However, the pieces had been scattered like a puzzle, and the Jinlongian character for *child* had been engraved twelve times on top of the chart.

“What is this supposed to mean?” Angelina muttered under her breath.

“The character for ‘child’ has two different readings,” Ryuho said while cocking his head. “Is it supposed to be *kokoko* or *shishishi*? And does it have anything to do with this tally?”

Ryuho stared down at the silver tally in his hand. Unfortunately, the door had no grooves in which the tally would fit. Unsure what else to do, Angelina touched the silver door. The puzzle pieces moved up, down, left, and right.

“It’s moving!” she cried out in alarm, whipping her hand back.

“Should we solve this puzzle?” Ryuho asked.

“But we don’t know what the characters mean.”

“Let’s just do what we understand for now!”

Angelina nodded. “Mishter Black Tortoise goes on top. These five stars form a straight line down the middle, and this symbol that looks like the *tsu* character goes beside it.”

It did seem to be an astrological chart.

“It’s the celestial poles and the Four Advisors,” Ryuho said. “In that case, the Blue Dragon goes on the right.”

“Yep! Mish Vermillion Bird goes on the bottom, and Mishter White Tiger goes on the left.”

The two children worked together to solve the puzzle. Yet, when they completed the astrological chart, each of the Four Divinities had a groove carved beneath their feet where the tally would fit. In other words, the grooves were shaped like a sleeping cat.

“How are we supposed to know where to put the tally?!” Ryuho shouted, ruffling his hair in frustration. “Those characters must be a hint.”

“But how are we supposed to read them?” Angelina asked. As she sank into perplexed contemplation, the magic bookmark around her neck radiated pale light. “Oh, right! My bookmark from Mish Wicker Cabinet!” She held up her bookmark and began reading the characters. “Let’s see here... Child of a cat. Kitten. Child of a lion. Cub.”

Both children came to the same conclusion simultaneously and grinned at each other. “It’s gotta be this one!” they cried out in unison.

Together, they placed the tally into the groove beneath the White Tiger’s feet. The silver tally wasn’t a cat but the White Tiger’s cub. After returning to its parent, the tally sank into the silver door, which opened without a sound.

A beach lay beyond the door. Considering Mt. Jinlong didn’t face the ocean, the Bai Ze must have created this world through his power. The pure white, unadulterated sand took on the shape of stars. As Angelina and Ryuho took a step forward, the sand crunched beneath their feet. Meanwhile, the warm and gentle sea breeze caressed their skin.

A white beast stood before them, its back facing the ocean. The creature had three eyes on the center of its forehead, each shining with a black luster like

outer space. A lion's mane grew around its face, and a goat's beard grew from its chin. Two bull horns grew from its head, and its feet were horse hooves.

The Bai Ze—a nigh mythical, supposedly omniscient beast that understood language—stood there. As the creature fixed its calm gaze on the children, its mane billowed solemnly in the breeze. Angelina and Ryuho both held their breaths, rendered speechless. All the while, waves lapped against the shore, and sea birds soared across the sky.

"Introduce yourselves, future rulers of nations," the Bai Ze instructed.

Gasping, Angelina bowed with her hands locked together in front of her chest. Ryuho scrambled to do the same.

"I am Angelina Xin Lei."

"And I'm Ryuho Ruo."

The Bai Ze squinted while observing the children as if looking at the sun. "Two new stars who have received the aid of the Four Divinities," he said with a pronounced nod. "You may sit. It has been many years since I have spoken to any humans. What purpose brought you here?"

Angelina knelt before the Bai Ze, the white sand crunching beneath her. "My fodder has been transformed into a child. Please tell me how to return him to normal, Mishter Bai Ze—I beg of you."

"I have the same request," Ryuho added, bowing his head. "I want you to heal Feilong... Um, please!"

"I cannot do that," the Bai Ze responded.

"Why not?" Angelina asked, looking at him with watery eyes.

The young girl's earnest gaze nearly caused the Bai Ze to succumb to emotion. "Feilong is not a virtuous statesman," he answered despite himself. "He is a sullied, fallen star. I do not wish for him to reclaim his throne."

"Fodder is a wonderful emperor!" Angelina cried out.

"Feilong killed his own father. He bears the sin of patricide, and thus, he lacks one of the eight virtues. I do not recognize him as a statesman."

The Bai Ze's resolute answer caused Angelina to fall silent.

"That said, Kyril is a pure star," he continued. "You are a beautiful star as well, Angelina. Abandon Feilong. If you do so, a new reign shall begin. The correct ruler shall preside over this dynasty with my recognition. It shall be a wonderful era of guaranteed fortune."

Angelina's mind went back. "You're seriously asking me to abandon Fodder...?"

She recalled the small and adorable Feilong. He was currently a toddler who'd forgotten everything. If he left the North Star Sanctuary, he wouldn't be able to survive on his own, as he had no parents. He could even be killed if his identity became common knowledge. Considering all that, was abandoning him the correct decision? When Angelina recalled her own abandonment, her words caught in her throat, and she found it difficult to breathe.

"Hey," Ryuho said while standing beside a frozen Angelina. "Wouldn't that be patricide too?"

Angelina and the Bai Ze looked at Ryuho.

"It would merely be abandonment," the Bai Ze answered with a humorless smile.

"But Feilong would die if we abandoned him," Ryuho argued. "He's so small right now. How is that any different from murder?"

As the Bai Ze fell silent, Ryuho bristled with irritation. He remembered when he'd first met Angelina. At the time, Feilong hadn't recognized her as his daughter, and he'd practically abandoned her. Now, the Bai Ze was asking Angelina to do the same thing to her father. Ryuho was furious with the creature.

"Feilong stained his hands with his father's blood," the Bai Ze said. "He has spurned filial piety—one of the eight virtues. Children must obey and honor their parents."

"Are you serious?" Ryuho asked. "Being a parent doesn't automatically make you a good person!"

The Bai Ze began to shrink from the boy's persistence.

"I don't like Feilong either, and I think he's a terrible guy," Ryuho said. "He's killed a lot of people, and he'll probably kill even more people in the future. I would understand if you couldn't forgive him for that."

"Killing in order to govern the empire is in line with loyalty and righteousness," the Bai Ze countered. "It is not a sin."

"Then it makes even less sense for only patricide to be a sin! The emperor before Feilong was the absolute worst. The nation improved when he died, right? People who kill children are worse than people who kill adults!"

The Bai Ze didn't respond.

"I don't know much about the eight virtues!" Ryuho continued shouting. "Jinlong's rules don't have anything to do with me, but bullying weak people is definitely, *definitely* wrong. Ignoring Lina was way, way worse than killing the previous emperor!"

The crabs walking along the beach grew frightened of Ryuho's roaring and buried themselves in the sand. When Ryuho quieted down, the area grew deathly quiet. While Angelina gaped, the Bai Ze eyed Ryuho.

"Um, Ryuho," Angelina said. "By that logic, it's okay if we don't return Fodder to normal, y'know?"

Jolting, Ryuho clapped his hand over his mouth. At that same time, tiger ears popped out of his head and drooped down. "Oh crap," he muttered. "Umm, what I meant to say is... Feilong should repent for what he's done and take better care of Lina. Yeah, that's what I meant!"

The Bai Ze let forth a bellowing laugh. "Ah, I see. I suppose you're right. You value the future more than the past. Is that right, Ryuho?"

Ryuho cocked his head, not seeming to understand the question.

"What do you think, Angelina?" the Bai Ze asked while scrutinizing her. His deep black eyes seemed capable of seeing through anything. "Do you not think patricide is a sin?"

"I don't know for sure," Angelina responded, hanging her head. "Fodder has

killed a lot of people. He murdered his fodder and even abandoned his child..."

No one could change the fact that Feilong had abandoned her in the past. To say she didn't resent him would be a lie. She'd even rejoiced in past loops upon hearing of her father's death.

But it was also Father who risked his life to protect me, she thought. I can't ignore the kindness he's shown me in this life!

Angelina lifted her head abruptly. "But no matter how bad Fodder is, I want him to return to normal!" She bowed her head low enough to get sand stuck to her light pink hair. "Please tell me how to return Fodder to normal, Mishter Bai Ze! I beg of you!"

Ryuho bowed his head alongside Angelina, getting white sand stuck to his forehead. "Please!"

The Bai Ze smiled ever so slightly at the two desperate children. "I appreciate your honesty. When you don't know something, you don't pretend otherwise. I haven't had such a pleasant dialogue in a long time. In deference to that, I will teach you how to return Feilong to normal."

A scroll and a book drifted up to the shore on white-crested waves. The Bai Ze opened the texts in front of him. The paper wasn't the least bit damp, perhaps because the ocean was magical.

"Feilong had time reversal magic cast upon him," the Bai Ze explained. "This is one of the Yulan Secret Arts. His reversed time transformed into sheet music and now resides with the rest of the secret arts. You must play the Reversed Time Score for him once again. If you do so, he will return to normal." Here, the Bai Ze turned his scrutinizing gaze on Angelina. "Listen closely, last remaining Princess of Yule and bearer of the Tianshi's Protective Seal." When Angelina nodded, the Bai Ze continued, "The Jinlongian Empire submerged the Yulan royal castle underwater."

"Underwater?" Angelina repeated.

"Indeed. Yule flourished thanks to the secret arts stored within its castle. The former Emperor of Jinlong tried to obtain the Yulan Secret Arts and failed. Nonetheless, he submerged the castle underwater to prevent any other nation

from obtaining them. As a result, the Yulan people lost most of their kingdom's land, and many of them became nomads."

Angelina bit her lip. "...How awful."

"You will need ice magic to reach the castle. The former Emperor of Jinlong unleashed monstrous fish in the lake to prevent anyone from entering. Freeze the lake surface and cross over."

"Will we be able to get into an underwater castle?" Ryuho asked.

The Bai Ze nodded. "The Queen of Yule sacrificed herself to cast a final spell that now protects the castle. As such, the castle is brimming with sorcery, and water cannot enter it. You can understand why even nations of great power fear the place, no?"

Ryuho gulped.

"Ice magic..." Angelina mumbled while looking at her hand.

She didn't know any spells to create ice. While Ryuho used flame magic, Kyril and Feilong's magic was derived from lightning.

"Do you not have a friend who can manipulate ice magic, Princess?" the Bai Ze asked.

Angelina and Ryuho's heads both shot up. "Hisame!" she cried.

"But Hisame's a Prince of Anda—an enemy nation!" Ryuho shouted. "He won't be allowed to go with us! Would it be impossible to cross the lake on a boat?"

"Monstrous fish reside in the lake," the Bai Ze responded. "They will attack any humans who attempt to cross by boat."

Ryuho quivered. He already hated boats to begin with.

"I will write you a letter," the Bai Ze said.

As he spoke, a white sea bird alighted in front of him. The Bai Ze picked up a brush in his mouth and wrote a short message on the bird's back. Afterward, the sea bird lay down on the shore and transformed into a letter. A moment later, a white rabbit hopped up to them while carrying a porcelain, seashell-

shaped receptacle. When the rabbit sat next to the letter, the seashell cracked open, revealing an ink pad inside. Thus, the Bai Ze used his hoof to press a red seal onto the letter next to his name.

“Take this along with a map,” he instructed, pushing the letter and an old map forward with his nose.

“Thank you so much!” Angelina cried, accepting them both reverently.

“A harsh journey awaits you,” the Bai Ze said. “And not everything you see in the ruined castle will be pleasant. Think for yourself and decide for yourself, Princess Angelina. Forge a path that you believe to be virtuous.”

“I will!” Angelina replied enthusiastically.

“Then let us be on our way. You may ride on my back.”

The Bai Ze presented his back to the children, urging them to climb aboard. Without delay, Angelina and Ryuho both mounted the mythical creature. Then, the Bai Ze kicked off from the beach. The white shore let forth a squeal, and the star-shaped sand danced in the air. Suddenly, a briar path similar to their previous journey surrounded them. Angelina and Ryuho traveled down a path of rainbow-colored roses while riding on the Bai Ze’s back. As the Phoenix and Garuda’s songs echoed in the distance, the Bai Ze’s airy mane fluttered in the wind, caressing Angelina’s face. Her fingers wiggled as she suppressed the urge to ruffle his mane. She couldn’t do something so rude to a mythical creature.

After exiting the dense briar road, they arrived atop the lake before the Celestial Axe Tower.

“Wow!” Angelina cried.

“What just happened?” Ryuho asked.

As both children expressed their surprise, a group of courtiers who recognized them cheered.

“Princess Angelina has returned with the Bai Ze!”

“I thought he was a mythical creature!”

“This is the greatest miracle since the founder descended from Heaven!”

The Bai Ze sauntered towards the tower, paying the crowd no heed. Having heard the commotion, Kyril raced down from the tower with Yuen. When the Bai Ze saw Kyril, he bent his knees, which allowed Angelina and Ryuho to clamber off his back.

“Big Brudder!” Angelina called out, springing into his arms.

“Lina!” Kyril cried, nuzzling his cheek against hers as he embraced her. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

The Bai Ze chuckled, for the prince acted as if he hadn’t even seen a mythical creature.

“Crown Prince Kyril—North Star of the coming generation,” the Bai Ze said.

Upon hearing this voice, Kyril regained his composure, bowing with hands locked together in front of his chest.

“Princess Angelina has received my wisdom,” the Bai Ze continued. “Please consult with her.”

“You have my utmost thanks for bringing my little sister home safely,” Kyril replied while bowing his head deeply. “I shall accept your wisdom with sincere gratitude, Lord Bai Ze.”

“You are a good child,” the Bai Ze answered with a pronounced nod. “See that your heart never wavers.”

“Mishter Bai Ze!” Angelina called out, walking in front of the creature. She asked timidly, “May I pray for your safe journey home?”

The Bai Ze nodded again and lowered his head. Angelina squeezed her arms around his neck and ruffled his fluffy mane. As the Tianshi’s Protective Seal on her right palm began to sparkle, the Bai Ze’s mane gleamed with an even more divine light.

“Thank you so much, Mishter Bai Ze,” Angelina said. “May you have a safe journey home.”

Relief washed over the Bai Ze as the tiny girl embraced him. She had the power to soothe those around her.

“Safe travels to you as well, Angelina,” the Bai Ze replied. When he glanced at

Ryuho, the displeasure on the boy's face caused him to chuckle. "I have parting words for you, too, young prince."

"Oh yeah?" Ryuho asked.

"Take care of Angelina."

Ryuho pursed his lips. "Of course I will!"

"Now then, the time has come for me to return home."

That said, the Bai Ze kicked off from the ground. At that moment, he disappeared without a trace. Only the letter and old map in Ryuho's hands remained. Deathly silence fell over the area, but one heartbeat later, the crowd erupted into cheers.

"The mythical Bai Ze appeared before Crown Prince Kyril! What better omen could there be?!"

"According to legend, the Bai Ze only appears before virtuous rulers. Only one emperor throughout our nation's history has ever received his words."

"And I thought the Bai Ze was just a myth..."

Ignoring the crowd, Yuen came to stand in front of Angelina. "I'm glad you've returned home safely, Princess Angelina."

"Yep!" Angelina responded. "It's all thanks to Ryuho!"

"So, what did the Bai Ze tell you?"

Ryuho thrust the letter and old map in front of Yuen, who gasped upon seeing them. "...In any case, you two need to rest in the North Star Sanctuary for the time being," Yuen said. "We can have a more thorough conversation later."

"But we need to save Fodder as soon as possible!" Angelina cried out, falling into a panic. "I have to go now!"

Kyril scooped up Angelina in his arms. He understood her impatience, but at the same time, the two children were exhausted. Angelina's clothes had started fraying in places, and star-shaped sand matted her light pink hair. Ryuho showed traces of having been wounded by something as well. Kyril could imagine how brutal their journey had been without even asking.

“Resting takes priority,” Kyril said. “Afterwards, we can take our time to work out our next course of action.”

“But!” Angelina tried to argue. Despite understanding Kyril’s words, she still felt pressed for time.

“There’s no need to panic, Lina. If we fret and make a mistake, there might be no way of taking it back.”

“Yeah, but...”

“For now, none of the dissidents will make their moves within the empire, seeing as the Bai Ze acknowledged me. You can rest easy.” When Kyril patted Angelina on the head, she pressed her forehead against his chest. “Well then, let’s go.”

“Kyril, that’s not fair!” Ryuho protested while hopping up and down. “I want to carry Lina!”

“You’re tired from protecting Lina this whole time, aren’t you?” Kyril asked. “You should try to get some rest for now.”

“That’s right, Master Ryuho,” Yuen agreed, picking up the boy.

Ryuho gritted his teeth. He *was* tired, and having someone big and strong like Yuen pick him up felt pleasant. Nevertheless, letting Kyril steal Angelina from him wasn’t the least bit amusing. As Ryuho continued to seethe with discontent, Yuen patted him on the back. Though Ryuho had been tense and exhausted until just a moment ago, Yuen’s large, warm hand lulled him to sleep. Angelina also breathed a long, relieved sigh from inside Kyril’s arms. Once she dozed off, Kyril and Yuen smiled at each other.



WORRY plagued Kyril as he looked over the letter and old map from the Bai Ze. Aside from him, Prime Minister Tomi, Yuen, and Junshi had gathered in one of the North Star Sanctuary’s rooms.

The news of Feilong’s transformation still hadn’t been made public. Ostensibly, he was taking an extended rest. That said, Feilong had protected the empire with his overwhelming might for many years. If news of his

transformation into a powerless child became public knowledge, nearby and vassal nations wouldn't remain quiet. Rumors were already circulating. People had started pressuring Kyril and probing into his affairs. Chaos in the empire seemed all but inevitable, and in the worst-case scenario, enemy nations would begin launching invasions.

Despite being the crown prince, Kyril had no strong backers, and he still wasn't powerful enough to govern Jinlong. Returning Feilong to normal as quickly as possible would prove best for the empire's stability. They would have to visit the Yulan castle and retrieve the sheet music in order to do so. Unfortunately, the previous emperor had submerged that castle underwater, and it had an enchantment cast upon it. According to the Bai Ze's letter, they wouldn't be able to enter the castle without Angelina—the final Princess of Yule.

Kyril looked at Tomi with a troubled expression. "What's more, he's even encouraging us to bring Hisame."

"The Andan prince?" Tomi asked.

"Apparently, we need an ice mage to freeze the lake where the castle is submerged."

"Prince Hisame is a one-in-a-million ice mage," Yuen said. "He's probably the only one who could freeze such a vast lake."

Junshi cast Yuen an anxious glance. "But he's an Andan prince. Is there not some other solution? Building a bridge or removing the water, for instance?"

Yuen shook his head. "I've seen the lake, and neither of those solutions is possible. The monstrous fish swimming in the water would prevent us from building a bridge. Naturally, we can't cross by boat either. The previous emperor made sure that no one could enter the castle. Furthermore, the lake has become a dam that collects snowmelt from Mt. Jinlong. Thawing the ice would harm the city downstream."

Junshi's head shot up. "Then let's ask the Golden Dragon for help! He'll definitely agree if the request comes from Angelina."

"Strange magic guards the area surrounding Yule Castle," Yuen replied. "The

castle only allows those it has recognized to approach. Even migratory birds avoid the air above the castle.”

“But—” Junshi began.

“Not a single imperial sorcerer could strike the castle with an arrow,” Yuen interrupted. “That’s why the previous emperor had no choice but to submerge it underwater.”

Tomi nodded. “We’ll still face a multitude of problems even if Prince Hisame decides to help us. Firstly, how much information should we share with Anda? If Anda learns of His Majesty’s situation, they’ll see this as a perfect opportunity to gain the upper hand. And if any harm comes to Prince Hisame, it will give them a pretext to launch an invasion.”

Everyone knew of Hisame’s affection for Angelina. Accepting an Andan prince into the canopy had raised more than a few eyebrows, as people often called them fiends. Even so, Hisame behaved well in the canopy, cultivating a good reputation at the academy. Jinlong and Anda had even brokered an armistice because of Hisame’s request to study abroad. In any case, Hisame valued Angelina dearly. He wouldn’t choose a path that would cause her misfortune.

“What if we convince Anda that we’re performing a reconnaissance mission?” Junshi suggested. “Hisame will be scouting out Yule Castle with a Prince of Nanran. Many nearby countries are interested in the Yulan Secret Arts. If we claim to be showing Hisame where those secret arts are hidden, then they might look upon this proposal favorably.”

Yuen nodded. “We’ll position troops around the castle to guarantee the children’s safety. That will be our highest priority.”

Tomi sighed. “Either way, we’ll have to request Prince Hisame’s cooperation.”

“Should we ask Princess Angelina to persuade him?” Junshi inquired.

Kyril stared at the three conversing men absentmindedly.

“Is something wrong, Prince Kyril?” Junshi asked.

Kyril suddenly came back to himself. “Well, I was wondering...” he mumbled, hanging his head. “I was wondering if Father would be happy returning to

normal."

Junshi responded with a sharp intake of breath.

"Father is living in blissful ignorance right now," Kyril said. "He laughs so often that I mistake him for a different person. Would he be happier to continue living as my little brother without remembering anything?" When silence fell over the room, Kyril continued, "Returning to normal would mean regaining all his memories, right? His father alienating him, the murders of his mother and grandfather, losing his wife. Perhaps he doesn't want to remember all those past tragedies." Here, Kyril balled his hand into a fist. "Being forgotten by my father is sad. And it'll be difficult to govern Jinlong without the cruel emperor's might. We probably won't be able to avoid war or civil insurrection. But if I take Father's happiness into account..."

"I think you're mistaken, Prince Kyril," Tomi answered with a smile, speaking in a relaxed manner. "If I were in the same position, I wouldn't want to forget Yuen or Junshi in exchange for numbing the pain of Ryoui's death. My pain and suffering are both part of who I am. I'm happy now *because* I have a past." When Kyril lifted his head, Tomi continued, "I'm fond of how His Majesty smiles right now as well. However, I also loved his expression when he looked at you and Princess Angelina as a father. If we don't restore his memories, that would equate to stealing two precious treasures from His Majesty... from Feilong. Please, Kyril, return Feilong to being your father."

When he finished speaking, Tomi bowed his head quietly.

"Prince Kyril," Junshi said. "His Majesty cares for you and Angelina more than you could ever know."

Gasping, Kyril recalled the Yulan lullaby that Feilong had sung to them.

My children are more precious to me than any gemstone, be it silver, gold, or pearls.

That had been Feilong's translation of the lyrics.

Yuen smiled. "Children are irreplaceable to their parents."

Junshi hung his head awkwardly.

“Understood,” Kyril said. “I won’t hesitate any longer. I’ll do everything in my power to return Father to normal. We have no choice but to trust the Bai Ze when it comes to Hisame.”

“I don’t think we’ll have anything to worry about with Ryuho present,” Yuen replied.

Junshi chuckled at that. “Let’s hope their bickering doesn’t cause Angelina too much grief.”

“Indeed,” Tomi agreed.

Thus, warm laughter enveloped the room.

Chapter 5: Angelina and Yule Castle

ANGELINA was departing for Yule today. Yuen had left ahead of her to set up camp around the lake where the castle had been submerged.

Following the meeting, Angelina and Kyril explained the situation to Hisame. Angelina had told Hisame the entire truth, as she hadn't wanted to lie to her friend. Not only had Hisame understood everything, but he'd volunteered to help. He'd even lied to Anda about it being a reconnaissance mission.



ANGELINA, Ryuho, and Hisame flew towards Yule in a basket carried by the Golden Dragon. The piercing wind roared past them, shaking the basket. As usual, Angelina looked like a Dharma doll in her heavy, cold-resistant outfit. Ryuho held Angelina against his belly to keep her warm, and her lapis lazuli charm hung from her waist.

Though Hisame wore cold-resistant clothes as well, the upper air was frigid. His teeth chattered as he tried to endure the dangerously low temperature. Frost had begun clinging to his eyelashes, and his mind was growing hazy. Even so, Hisame squeezed his amulet in his hand, which formed a matching set with Angelina's.

Seeing that, Ryuho clucked his tongue. "Enough with the dramatics!" he shouted, pulling Hisame against his belly as well.

"Ryuho?!" Hisame cried out, his eyes widening.

"Don't make a big deal out of this! You're weak, and if anything happens to you, Anda will invade, right? And what would be the point of you coming with us if you dropped dead before we even crossed the lake?"

Hisame smiled stiffly. *Ryuho's still warm even at a time like this*, he thought. *Unlike him, I'm shaking like a leaf in this wind. Could I be any more weak or pathetic?*

"Thank you," Hisame mumbled.

Ryuho didn't answer, pretending not to have heard.

Angelina began stroking Ryuho's neck. As a purr rumbled in his throat, he pulled Angelina and Hisame even closer. The two human children narrowed their eyes blissfully while listening to the happy, gentle timbre of Ryuho's voice.



“That’s Yule Castle,” the Golden Dragon said.

The children poked their heads out of the basket. A large lake surrounded by a coniferous forest spread out beneath them. Furthermore, a chalk tower shaped like a hexagonal prism protruded from the water. A bell hung inside the tower, and a cross similar to Angelina’s dagger rose from the top. Overall, the structure resembled a gravestone. The rest of the castle was submerged in crystal clear water, and the remains of Yule could be seen at the bottom of the lake. Schools of large, monstrous fish swam above the ruins. The remains of a town that bore traces of its former liveliness slept at the bottom of the lake as if time had stopped.

“My goodness...” Hisame mumbled, at a loss for any other words.

Despite its wonder and beauty, this sight was—above all else—cruel.

“The Yulan capital was once a small basin,” the Golden Dragon explained. “According to Yulan legend, a tianshi drained the water from a lake to create the country.”

“And the previous Emperor of Jinlong refilled the basin with water?” Hisame ventured.

The dragon nodded. “You know your history.”

Angelina couldn’t help but shudder. “Did everyone drown?”

“The previous emperor refilled the basin with water *after* suppressing Yule,” the Golden Dragon replied. “Many people fled during the chaos of war. Though the previous emperor offered to spare the Yulan queen’s life if she surrendered the castle, she resisted until the end. Eventually, she sacrificed herself to place a magical seal upon the castle. That caused Jinlong to grow desperate. What could the castle contain that was worth dying for to protect? The previous emperor was certain that the Yulan Secret Arts resided within its walls.”

The Golden Dragon circled the air above the lake while carrying the children.

“No matter how many times the previous emperor tried to invade the castle, he always failed,” the dragon continued. “He couldn’t flatten the castle either. In the end, he submerged it underwater so that no one could approach it. He

feared other nations stealing the Yulan Secret Arts, after all.”

Finally, the Golden Dragon approached the tower protruding from the lake. As he did so, sparks burst from his beard as if something invisible had repelled him.

“Mishter Dragon!” Angelina cried.

“Do you understand now?” he asked. “Not even I can touch the castle.”

Angelina’s skin erupted in goosebumps. What kind of sorcery could reject even the Golden Dragon? Powerful rage and resentment must have been required to activate such strong magic. The coniferous forest surrounding the lake rustled noisily, seeming to hurl accusations at Angelina’s group. The cold wind blowing from the lake shore swept past the tower, crying out in a dreadful voice. Shivering, Angelina rubbed her arms. After seeing the appalling results of the previous emperor’s actions, she could understand why people resented her family. What did the Yulan people think of her mother, who’d married into the Xin Lei family and bore two of their children?

“The Yulan people couldn’t forgive me for being the Imperial Princess of Jinlong,” Angelina said. “That’s why the troupe leader wanted to use magic to prevent me from ever being born...”

“Lina,” Ryuho said before licking her on the cheek. When she lifted her head, he continued, “You’re just you, Lina. Before being the Royal Princess of Yule or the Imperial Princess of Jinlong, you’re just you!”

“I think so too,” Hisame agreed, squeezing Angelina’s hand encouragingly.

“Thanks!” Angelina replied.

Relief washed over the Golden Dragon as he watched this exchange. “Angelina won’t err with you two by her side,” he said.

He set the basket down on the lake shore, where Jinlongian knights had set up camp under Yuen’s command. “All right, let’s go!” Ryuho shouted. As he placed Angelina on his back and hopped out of the basket, Hisame scrambled after them.

When Yuen noticed Angelina, he knelt before her on one knee. “We’ve been

waiting for your arrival, Princess Angelina.”

Angelina bowed her head. “I’m trusting you and all the knights to watch our backs as we cross the lake, Mishter Yuen.”

All the knights broke into dopey smiles while regarding the princess. A moment later, twigs snapping echoed from the forest, and a group of bedraggled people emerged from the trees. They wore the same clothes as the traveling Yulan performers. Without delay, Yuen and his knights surrounded the newcomers. In response, the people raised their hands and fell to their knees to show their lack of hostility.

An old woman with eyes similar to Marfa spoke up first. “We mean you no harm. We merely seek an audience with the new Royal Princess of Yule.”

Despite her resemblance to Marfa, she was as emaciated as a withered branch.

“Royal Princess Angelina!” other elderly people behind the woman cried out in unison. When they looked up at Angelina with fevered eyes, she had no idea how to respond. She didn’t even know how they recognized her.

“The person standing before you is Angelina Xin Lei,” Yuen responded with a scowl. “The *Imperial* Princess of Jinlong.”

“In other words, she is Empress Phaenna’s posthumous child,” one member of the group replied.

“Without any doubt, she is a royal princess of the Yuan line,” another added.

The people continued repeating, “Royal princess, royal princess.”

Angelina shrank back from their fervor. She’d never been to Yule until now, and she didn’t recognize herself as the royal princess. Moreover, a traveling Yulan performer had been the one to cast that strange magic on her. She couldn’t trust them so easily, regardless of their claims to mean no harm.

As Angelina regarded them timidly, the old woman launched into an explanation. “We are Yulan citizens. Not many of us can live here, as there are few fields and so little land to live on. Those with enough strength to survive on their own fled to other countries. Those of us who couldn’t flee live in hiding

within this forest. Every single one of us is old and feeble.”

Upon closer inspection, elderly and unarmed people comprised the entire group. Based on their shabby clothes and emaciated bodies, they didn’t look capable of fighting.

“We’ve been waiting for you for so, so long...” the old woman said in a heartrending voice, her eyes pleading.

“Why?” Angelina asked.

“The castle bell that celebrates the birth of a princess suddenly rang out during spring. Afterward, we began hearing the song of a tianshi from the castle. At that moment, we knew a Yulan princess was still alive somewhere. When we heard news from Yulan citizens scattered across the lands, we became aware of your existence, Princess Angelina.”

The Yulan people stared at Angelina raptly.

“A little while later, a casket fell from the sky,” the old woman continued. “Inside, we found a golden-haired man holding sheet music. That man relayed the tianshi’s oracle to us. He instructed us to visit Jinlong and regale Princess Angelina with shadow puppetry depicting Yule’s founding myth. By doing so, she would come to see herself as the Yulan princess and return to this land to restore our country!”

The old woman grew even more excited as she continued.

“And so, we summoned performers traveling across foreign lands back here. Before long, they left for Jinlong with the golden-haired man as their troupe leader. We thought you might be able to enjoy Yulan music with a festival just around the corner. Seeing as you’re here now, you must have seen the shadow puppet show, no?!”

Angelina nodded.

“We’ve been told that the seal on the castle will lift when a new princess appears,” the old woman concluded. “And now, that day has finally come.”

Yuen narrowed his eyes at the old woman. “Do you know how to enter the castle?”

"If you can cross the lake, I can guide you through the castle," the old woman replied, bowing her head reverently. "I'm the mother of Marfa—Empress Phaenna's personal handmaid. I was also Her Majesty's wetnurse."

"You're Marfa's mudder?!" Angelina cried out in alarm.

The old woman smiled. "I am. You know my daughter?"

"She's my wetnurse."

"My goodness! Is Marfa doing well? I haven't been able to contact her since she was taken to the canopy with Empress Phaenna."

Angelina nodded. "Yes, she's doing well. She's always taken good care of me."

"That's wonderful," the old woman said, tears welling her in her eyes. "My family has served the royal family for generations."

"Then do you know about the barrel organ sheet music?" Angelina asked. "The one that plays music backward and forwards."

The old woman smiled again. "Yes, the golden-haired man had that sheet music in his possession. It's extremely rare."

"It was enchanted with time reversal magic. Is that Yulan sorcery?"

The old woman cocked her head. "Did his sheet music really have that sort of power?"

"Yes! I have to restore the reversed time and return Fodder to normal! Please help me!"

Hiding Feilong's situation would be pointless after coming this far. Thus, Angelina pleaded for their cooperation.

"What's the problem?" the old woman asked with a sneer. "Aren't things fine as they are?"

Yuen clutched the sword at his waist. "What do you mean?"

"I've heard the rumors. The cruel emperor didn't acknowledge Princess Angelina as his daughter for three years, no?"

"What of it?" Yuen asked. "Normally, members of the Jinlongian imperial family are recognized as royalty during the Naming Ceremony on their fifth

birthday."

The old woman laughed scornfully. "That lie might suffice in Jinlong, but it won't fool us Yulans. Her birth wasn't even celebrated! She must have suffered a great deal! The emperor has no right to act like a father after abandoning her for three whole years! That's why the Yulan Secret Arts punished him!"

"But the troupe leader was targeting me," Angelina said, unable to suppress her confusion. "Fodder sacrificed himself to save me."

"That's impossible!" the old woman protested. "You're our only hope for the restoration of Yule, Princess Angelina! He would never have done such a thing."

Baffled, Angelina looked at Ryuho, who furrowed his brow.

"Well then, is the sheet music containing Feilong's past here now?" Hisame asked. "From what we've heard, his time was reversed by the Yulan Secret arts."

"I've never seen the secret arts myself," the old woman replied. "But from what I've heard, you can gain access to the secret arts and whatever they obtained through the queen's bedroom."

"Then please lead us there!" Hisame implored.

The old woman glanced at Angelina. "...Why?"

"Because I want to return Fodder to normal!" Angelina cried.

"You want to return the cruel and inhuman emperor back to normal?" the old woman asked with a laugh. "What in the world are you saying? I know just how much Empress Phaenna suffered at the hands of Jinlong. We Yulan citizens suffered as well. The emperor mustn't be returned to normal." Here, the old woman's lips twisted into a grin. "Crown Prince Kyril has Yulan blood flowing through his veins. He should become the next emperor."

"But what will happen to Fodder?" Angelina pressed. "We can't hide him forever, y'know?"

"Then exile him."

"No, I could never do something so awful..."

"It isn't the least bit awful," the old woman insisted. "Feilong has wounded and killed a great many people. He should atone for his sins."

A sudden gust of frigid wind blew from the coniferous forest, whipping up Angelina's hair.

"Crown Prince Kyril is gentle and wise," the old woman continued, looking at Angelina with an enrapt expression. "His reign would be far more wonderful than the tyranny of a cruel and brutal emperor. It would be for the good of the empire. Do you not agree?"

Father did abandon me, Angelina thought. As a result, I suffered across three lives, wishing for love and freedom the entire time. Yet, in the end, I struggled, suffered, and died multiple times. Even now, I'm not confident about my right to live. Everything is Father's fault. What's more, the Bai Ze said the same thing as this old woman. Kyril taking the throne would be better for the empire. At the same time, Father protected me from that magic. He became a child rather than let me die. He might have been awkward, but he always did his best to make me happy. And if I never heard his lullaby again, that would be terribly sad. I want him to remember me!

"Ryuho," Angelina said, looking at him with wavering eyes. "The Bai Ze and this woman both said the same thing. Am I wrong? What should I do for the good of the empire?"

Angelina didn't have confidence in herself. People had treated her as subhuman since the time of her birth, constantly ridiculing her ideas. Furthermore, she'd died multiple times on the paths she'd chosen. *Will I fail again?* she wondered. *Will my decisions make everyone around me unhappy?*

Ryuho blinked, puzzled. "I don't care what happens to Feilong. If you want to abandon him, that's fine by me. He's done enough to deserve that. He made his bed so he can lie in it!"

The Yulan people stirred as the large tiger spoke. They stared at Angelina's group, unable to believe their eyes.

"...That's terrible," Angelina said.

"But if you're happy, I'm happy," Ryuho answered as if it were the most

natural thing in the world. “If you want to live with Feilong, I’ll help make that happen! I don’t care if the rest of the empire is miserable so long as you’re happy!”

“Don’t listen to that selfish creature!” the old woman spat. “He’s a wicked monster who speaks with a human tongue!”

Angelina squeezed Ryuho in her arms. She glared at the old woman and said, “How dare you speak to a holy Flame Tiger in such a manner?”

In response to Angelina’s resolute, suddenly adult tone, the old woman took a startled step backward.

Ryuho snorted. “Don’t act all high and mighty like you care about the empire. You just want to kill Feilong, right? Don’t force that responsibility onto Lina! Don’t use her to get revenge!”

“I’m going to save my father,” Angelina decided. “Please guide me through the castle.”

The old woman gritted her teeth. “In that case, I can’t be your guide. My clan serves the Yulan royal family, and you aren’t worthy of becoming our princess! In the end, you’re merely the Imperial Princess of Jinlong!”

When the old woman shot to her feet, Yuen unsheathed his sword, and Ryuho stood up as well.

“Go ahead and kill me if you please,” she said. “I’m nothing more than an unarmed, feeble, old woman who had her country stolen from her. By all means, trample us underfoot and continue living your lives as if nothing happened!”

“Don’t kill her, Yuen!” Angelina cried.

This old woman was Marfa’s mother. They couldn’t kill her when she hadn’t even attacked anyone.

“That girl isn’t our princess!” the old woman called out to the Yulan citizens. “She’s a traitor who’s submitted herself to Jinlong! She won’t be able to enter the castle.”

After shooting scornful glances at Angelina, the old woman and the Yulan

citizens disappeared into the dark forest. Only the waves echoed across the silent lakeshore.

Will I really be able to enter the castle? Angelina wondered while gazing at the solitary tower protruding from the water. The vast distance between the shore and the castle filled her with anxiety.

Ryuho pressed his nose into Angelina's stomach. "Don't spare those old folks a second thought."

Relief washed over her. "Yeah!" she agreed, rubbing him between the ears.

Hisame patted Angelina on the back as well. "Don't worry—I'll build a bridge to the other side."

"Okay!" Angelina cried, raising her head in a show of resolve. "We're counting on you, Hisame."

Snowmelt from Mt. Jinlong flowed into the lake. Consequently, the water chilled Hisame to the bone as he walked into it. He submerged himself up to the knees, biting back pain all the while. He would transform the frigidity of the lake into power to build the bridge. As such, he chilled himself near to the point of death. His teeth chattered, and his lips turned blue.

Upon sensing a human in their waters, the monstrous fish attacked.

"Hisame!" Angelina and Ryuho cried out in unison.

At that moment, a volley of arrows shot towards the fish. Yuen and his soldiers were supporting Hisame from the rear.

"Freeze thy waters, great lake!" Hisame shouted while placing his hands on the water's surface. "Build us a bridge to thy castle!"

The lake creaked as it began to freeze over. White clumps of drift ice formed here and there, floating on the water's surface. However, it was far from a bridge.

"Freeze!" Hisame shouted, placing his hands on a clump of ice. "Freeze thy waters deeper and thicker than a glacier!"

As the layer of ice grew thicker, a white line began to float atop the transparent water. Ice formed around Hisame as well, freezing his legs along

with the lake.

“Hisame!” Angelina cried out on the verge of tears. “That’s enough! You’re going to freeze! That’s enough...”

“I’ve almost finished building the bridge,” Hisame replied, turning to face Angelina with a trembling smile. “Wait just a little while longer, okay? No matter what, I’ll build a bridge you can walk across safely...”

“Keep going!” Ryuho barked. “Give it all you got! Don’t give in, Hisame!”

Angelina gasped. *That’s right, she thought. I should be encouraging Hisame, not telling him to stop! He’s doing everything in his power to build us a bridge! I need to cheer him on!*

“Keep going, Hisame!” Angelina exclaimed. “You can do this!” While still standing on the shore, she touched the solid, extremely cold ice that Hisame had created. “Lend your power to Hisame—I beg of you!” Angelina’s magic enveloped Hisame and circulated through the ice, letting forth a roar as it surged across the lake. “Hear me and obey, ice of the lake!”

As the drift ice let forth a roar, clumps collided together, pinning and freezing the monstrous fish. Finally, the ice gathered to form a white bridge as if pulled together by a magnet. A large road now led to the castle.

“...Incredible,” one of the knights murmured.

The rest watched the bridge form in awe. Despite being a Prince of Anda, Hisame was delicate and feminine. As such, the knights hadn’t held him in high esteem. Nevertheless, Hisame had been bold enough to freeze his legs to build the bridge. An unimaginable strength of spirit radiated from him as he continued casting magic.

Once the bridge had finished forming, Hisame waved to Angelina emphatically. His face was pale, his lips were purple, and his legs were frozen to his thighs. “You can cross now!”

Angelina and Ryuho raced over to him.

“I’m going to save you, Hisame!” Ryuho shouted before spewing fire at the ice.

“Stop!” Hisame cried. “You’ll melt the bridge!”

“I know! I know, but... You’re going to freeze to death!”

“It’s okay, Ryuho,” Angelina said, hugging him and ruffling his fur. “Can you lend me some of your strength?”

As Ryuho’s orange coat began to sparkle, his magical power coiled around Angelina. After gathering the Flame Tiger’s warmth in her hands, Angelina squeezed Hisame in her arms. Pleasant heat tinged her entire body and enveloped Hisame. Immediately, he warmed up wherever she touched. It felt as though his body was melting from its core. This blissful sensation coaxed an enrapt sigh from his lips.

“May his legs slip out safely!” Angelina cried, the protective seal on her right hand sparkling.

The ice had crawled up to Hisame’s thighs, but in response to Angelina’s words, it shattered into small pieces and disappeared.

“Can you move your legs?” Angelina asked worriedly.

Smiling, Hisame jittered his legs, pulling them out of the ice carefully. In the end, two holes remained on top of the bridge.

Ryuho grabbed Hisame’s collar with his teeth and threw him onto his back. “You get to ride me just this once! Hold on tight!”

“Thank you,” Hisame replied.

“You put your life on the line to keep the ice from melting, after all!”

Hisame clung to Ryuho’s back with all his might. “Thank you!”

“You hop on too, Lina!” the Flame Tiger instructed.

“Okay!” she called back, taking a seat behind Hisame. She then squeezed Hisame in her arms.

Angelina and Ryuho are both so warm, Hisame thought. Tears threatened to spill from his eyes as emotion swelled in his chest. Nevertheless, he bit his lip and raised his head. He spread his arms, expelling ice magic from his hands. The moisture in the atmosphere froze, drifting through the air like flower petals. All

the while, Ryuho sprinted headlong towards the castle. Whenever the monstrous fish tried to leap over the bridge, the Jinlongian soldiers shot them down with arrows.

“Keep going, Hisame!” Angelina cried, supporting his waist. “Keep going, Ryuho!”

After crossing the bridge, they arrived at the tip of the tower. It was a hexagonal prism isolated from the rest of the castle. A cross similar to Angelina’s dagger rose from the top of the roof. All six sides of the tower’s highest point formed archways, and a bell hung from the inside.

“This is the legendary golden bell...” Angelina murmured in astonishment.

The bell shone so beautifully that no one would ever suspect its ancient origins. A stone staircase wrapped around the outside of the tower, and arched windows opened up here and there. Something akin to a rainbow-colored oil film enveloped the entirety of Yule Castle. That was, perhaps, why the castle hadn’t been frozen. Not even a single drop of water had seeped through its walls.

Angelina climbed off Ryuho’s back. “So this is Yule Castle...” she mumbled, timidly extending a hand towards its walls.

“I wouldn’t touch it directly if I were you,” Hisame warned.

Nodding, Angelina unsheathed her dagger—her mother’s memento. She pressed the tip of the blade against the thin film, puncturing it ever so slightly. With the blade still penetrating the film, she drew a large oval, forming an elliptical entrance in the magic barrier. As she took a step forward, Ryuho grabbed her collar with his teeth.

“Hop on my back again, Lina,” he said. “What if we can’t enter without you?”

Angelina nodded again and climbed on Ryuho’s back. Then, he strode through the elliptical entrance with both passengers, setting foot on the staircase circling the tower. Just then, the entrance closed, producing a sound like a gust of wind. Not a single monstrous fish or drop of water could pass through the thin film. It must have been powerful magic. Despite their successful entry, could they exit just as safely?

After the children climbed off Ryuho's back, the trio raced down the stairs, arms pumping and legs burning. Upon reaching solid ground, they all breathed a sigh of relief. Without delay, they began to explore the castle while consulting the Bai Ze's old map. The scent of sweet flowers permeated the entire castle.

Before long, Hisame took a piece of chalk from his pocket and drew the Tianshi's Protective Seal on the stone floor.

"What are you doing?" Ryuho asked while sniffing the seal.

"Well..." Hisame replied while fidgeting. "I'm leaving marks so we'll know the way back, regardless of whether we lose the map or get separated."

Hisame was taking precautions due to his timidity. In Anda, he would have been mocked as a coward for using this method. However, Angelina and Ryuho both looked at him with sparkling eyes.

"Whoa, you're smart!" Ryuho shouted.

"You're amazing, Hisame!" Angelina cried.

"...But it's not very fiendish, is it?" Hisame asked timidly.

"No, but it is something *you* would do!" Ryuho answered.

Hisame started in surprise. "I see. It's something *I* would do."

"No one else would've thought of this!" Angelina chimed in. "What a wonderful idea."

Hisame's heart trembled with delight. He hardly ever received compliments for acting like himself, causing him to swell with happiness.

"Well then, let's leave marks as we continue exploring," Hisame said.

The other two nodded. As they continued onwards, Hisame left more marks, and Angelina cast protective magic on top of the chalk to prevent it from disappearing. The castle was so warm that no one would suspect it of being submerged in water. Even so, it was covered in dust and devoid of people.

"We were told that the sheet music is in the queen's room," Hisame said while examining the map. "But I don't see it here."

Ryuho cocked his head. "Is her room labeled under a different name?"

Angelina looked at the map through the wicker cabinet's bookmark. Unfortunately, the map appeared no different from before she'd entered the castle. As she let out a soft sigh, the protective seal on her right hand began shining faintly. An idea occurred to her, and she raised her hand over the map.

"Please tell me the location of the queen's room!" she ordered.

Slowly, red ink blotted one room in the shape of a Tianshi's Protective Seal.

"That's it!" Ryuho and Hisame exclaimed in unison, nodding to each other.

"Then let's go!" Angelina cheered.

The trio continued marching towards the queen's room while drawing protective seals on the walls. Dust floated in the air, and light shone through the water's surface, creating glimpses of rippling shadows. When the children spoke, their voices echoed as if in a cave. Outside the window, fish with glinting scales swam in schools. Flowers bloomed from aquatic plants invisible on the surface, and fish eggs swayed in the water. A phantasmal, dreamlike quality tinged everything around them.

Finally, they arrived before the queen's room. The door had a triangular keyhole, its groove the same size as the Dagger of Mercy's blade.

"Is this the keyhole?" Hisame asked.

Nodding, Angelina unsheathed the dagger and stuck it in the groove. The dagger spun around of its own accord, and the door opened. After placing Angelina on his back, Ryuho stepped into the room, floral-scented dust whirling up around them. A large desk sat in front of a grand window on the opposite wall. To their right was an old-fashioned furnace filled with unburnt firewood. Perhaps the room had been left untouched since the lake's flooding.

Portraits of successive queens hung on the wall, their names written beneath the frames. At first, their last names were simply Yule, but partway through, that changed to Ci Té Yule. The final portrait depicted Angelina's grandmother. Yule had been destroyed before Phaenna could become queen, after all. Regardless, Angelina stared at the empty space beside the final painting. By rights, her mother's portrait should have been hung there.

"Phaenna Ci Té Yule," Angelina said her mother's name out loud.

“Achoo!”

Ryuho let out an enormous sneeze, kicking up a cloud of dust. Everyone closed their eyes at once. Strangely, however, Hisame and Ryuho fell into a deep sleep before they could reopen their eyes. A bewildered Angelina was still on Ryuho’s back as he slumped onto his belly. In any event, she didn’t suspect any foul play, as his soft snores were quite happy.

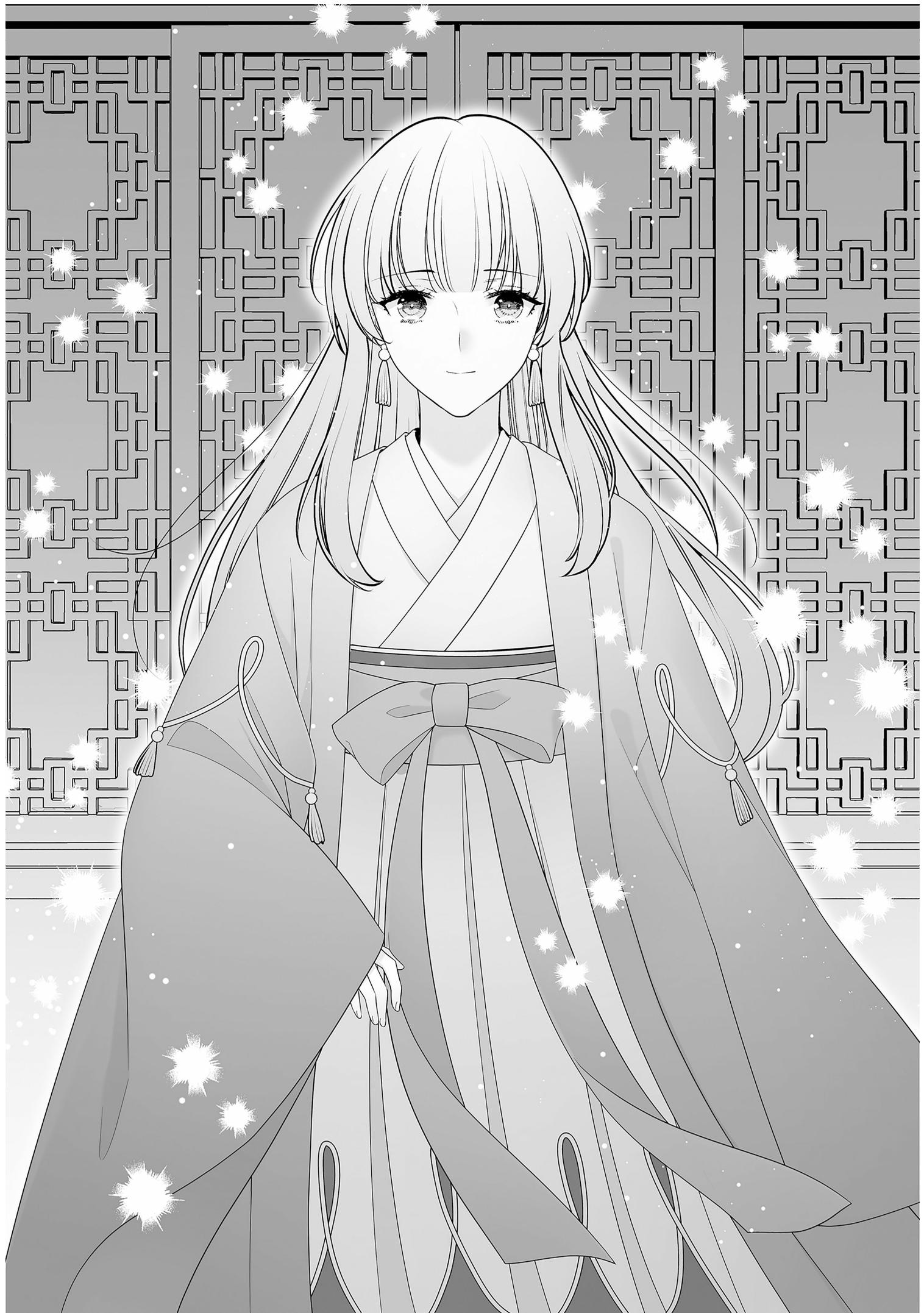
After clambering off Ryuho, Angelina started shaking him. “Ryuho!” she called out to him. “Ryuho!”

In response, Ryuho kneaded the air like a happy kitten. He seemed to be having a pleasant dream.

“Wake up, Hisame!” Angelina cried, shaking him as well. He didn’t respond either.

“...Angelina,” a voice whispered. “You’re Angelina, aren’t you?”

Lifting her head, Angelina found a translucent woman standing in the dust-shrouded room. Her buoyant hair fell to her waist—the same light pink as Angelina’s. Likewise, she had azure eyes. She was none other than Angelina’s mother. Angelina recognized from a portrait in her father’s room.



“...Mudder?” Angelina asked in a timid voice.

The woman nodded slowly, tears welling in her eyes. “I’m your mother—Phaenna Ci Té Yule. I put the other children to sleep because I wanted to talk to you.”

“Mudder!” Angelina cried while racing over to Phaenna. Her mother often appeared in her dreams, and she’d wanted to meet her for so, so long. *If only Mother had survived*, she’d thought countless times. Though part of her had resented Phaenna for leaving her behind, her yearning for her mother had been even stronger. Marfa had told her stories of Phaenna, Kyril had recounted memories of her, and Feilong had sung her lullaby. Angelina had gathered those small fragments in search of the mother she had no personal memories of.

Angelina spread out her arms and tried to hug Phaenna. Unfortunately, her outstretched hands passed through her mother’s incorporeal form.

“I’m sorry,” Phaenna said, looking at Angelina sadly. “I can’t hug you anymore.”

Angelina shook her head and bit her lip. “No, it’s okay! Just being able to see you is enough.”

“Truly. I never expected to hear your voice, either. Is Kyril a kind brother? Feilong might look scary, but he’s not a bad person.”

“Big Brudder’s really nice. He’s cool and smart too!”

Phaenna’s eyes twinkled. “How wonderful.”

“I don’t understand Fodder too well, but I know he’s nicer than he looks.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Does he take good care of you?”

“Yeah, he does!”

Phaenna smiled at Angelina’s confident answer. “Why did you come here?”

“Well, Fodder turned into a child because of time-reversal magic. I came looking for the sheet music so we can return him to normal.”

“What?!” Phaenna exclaimed, her eyes widening. “How could such a thing happen? I can’t imagine Feilong cranking the barrel organ, considering how

vigilant he is.”

“Actually, I’m the one who cranked the organ,” Angelina replied. “But Fodder cast a protective spell on me. Then he got hit with the magic intended for me...”

“But why would a Yulan citizen try to curse you? One of our people would never cause you any harm.”

“I don’t know either.” Angelina hung her head. “Other Yulans said the same thing, but apparently, the troupe leader who brought the barrel organ was out to get me. He turned into a wooden doll when Fodder rebounded his magic.”

Phaenna regarded Angelina with a pained expression. She couldn’t reach out and pat her daughter’s head, no matter how much she wanted to. So, instead, she balled her hand into a fist and bit her lip.

“I’m so happy Feilong protected you,” she said. “Angelina... You must inherit the Yulan Secret Arts.”

Angelina cocked her head. “I must?”

“The secret arts are why Yule flourished as a small, frozen country in the far north,” Phaenna responded with a bitter smile. “Yet, in the end, desire for them from both Jinlong and other nearby countries brought about our destruction.”

“Do the secret arts have anything to do with returning Fodder to normal? I only need the sheet music.”

Phaenna laughed softly. “You don’t need them even though everyone else wants them?”

Angelina furrowed her brow, unable to understand the question. “Didn’t you just say that having them caused Yule’s destruction?”

“Indeed,” Phaenna answered sadly, fixing her daughter with a serious look. “You’re very clever, Lina. Perhaps everyone else should have come to the same conclusion sooner. In any case, the time-reversal sheet music is with the Yulan Secret Arts. The secret arts are powerful magic only the queen can withdraw and use. The inaugural queen used this mighty sorcery to drain the lake, cultivate fields in the basin, summon rainfall, and gather sunlight. Surrounding countries sought Yule’s favor in the hopes of studying the magic, and we taught

them in exchange for compensation. The magic used in Jinlong today branched off from ancient Yulan sorcery. The Tianshi's Protective Seal is one of our nation's first forms of magic. That is how we prospered."

Angelina looked at the protective seal on her palm. Noticing it, Phaenna gasped.

"Three markings..." she murmured, wrapping her incorporeal hands around Angelina's palm as tears spilled from her eyes. "Then you had your life stolen three times? How you must have suffered."

Angelina shook her head. "I'm happy now. Everything's okay. But if you know about these markings, then..."

"When the Queen of Yule meets an untimely end, she can redo her life exactly three times. The condition for activating this spell is having the Dagger of Mercy. Feilong must have given you the knife, as I told him."

Angelina nodded. *I see, she thought, gripping the dagger tightly. If Father hadn't given me this knife, I would have died for good at the end of my first life. He saved me even before I ever looped.*

"Lina," Phaenna said. "There's a path to the Yulan Secret Arts beneath the fireplace. You must go down there. A tianshi sculpture serves as the magical seal for the secret arts. Successive queens have claimed the secret arts by plunging the Dagger of Mercy into the sculpture's pedestal and pouring their magic into it. That is how the secret arts are passed down from generation to generation."

"A tianshi sculpture?" Angelina repeated. "Like the character from the shadow puppet play?"

"You know about the fallen tianshi then? That's correct. I've never seen the actual sculpture myself, as Yule fell to ruin before I became queen. From what I've heard, everything gained through the Yulan Secret Arts is stored within the sculpture's drawer. You'll need to use a secret incantation to open the drawer. The time-reversal sheet music is almost certainly in there as well. If you inherit the secret arts, you'll probably be able to retrieve the sheet music." Phaenna used her right hand to point the way to Angelina. "The secret incantation is *eas pa vichi*."

“Eas pa vichi?” Angelina repeated.

“Correct. It’s an ancient Yulan phrase whose meaning has been forgotten.”

Angelina stooped down before the unlit hearth and pushed the firewood aside. As a result, an iron trapdoor appeared at its base. When Angelina stuck her dagger into the triangular keyhole, the door opened, revealing stairs leading below. After sheathing her dagger, Angelina turned to face her mother from inside the hearth.

“Thanks, Mudder!” she cried.

Smiling, Phaenna waved back to her enthusiastically. “Thank you for living,” she said, tears sparkling around the outer corners of her eyes. “You make me proud to be a mother.”

A pleasant warmth spread throughout Angelina’s whole body. She’d never expected anyone to thank her simply for living.

“May I ask you one thing, Mudder?” Angelina asked.

“What is it?”

Angelina struggled to find the right words. “Were you... Um, were you happy?”

“I was,” Phaenna replied with a dazzling smile. “Getting to meet Feilong, Kyril, and finally, you, made me so happy. I’m happy now, too. Meeting the three of you must have been why I was born.”

Angelina’s chest swelled with emotion as Phaenna’s smile held no hint of a lie.

“And for that reason, your life means more to me than anything else,” Phaenna said. “Promise me you won’t do anything dangerous, all right?”

“Promise!” Angelina responded energetically, setting foot on the stairs below the hearth. “Be back soon!”

Though the staircase smelled of soot, magical flames illuminated the walls, showing her the way to go. *I’ll be able to return Father to normal in just a little while!* Angelina thought, descending the stairs on light feet.



THE moment Ryuho awoke, his eyes widened. Angelina was nowhere to be seen. “Damn it!” he shouted. “Where are you, Lina?! Liiiiinaaaaaa!”

“Nothing will come of making a fuss, Ryuho,” Hisame snapped, bristling with irritation.

“Then what should we do?!” Ryuho shouted. “Do you know where Lina is?!”

Hisame hung his head. “N-No, I don’t know...”

The Andan prince suppressed the urge to cry while staring down at the map. *I wanted to stay by Angelina’s side and protect her, he thought. I wanted to make all her dreams come true. But now she’s disappeared without a trace.*

“Lina!” Ryuho barked loud enough to draw blood from his throat. “Lina! Liiinaaa!”

Sadness, frustration, and fear overwhelmed the Flame Tiger. *Why is my heart racing so fast just because Lina isn’t here? he wondered. I’m shaking like a leaf.* He began cleaning his fur to suppress his agitation. Then, he pawed his whiskers, which had become matted while sleeping. *If only I were stronger! I should’ve studied harder! Then I would know how to find Lina!*

Ryuho bit his lip, frustrated by his powerlessness.

“She must be over there!” Hisame cried, pointing to the hearth embedded in the wall. Flames crackled inside the furnace.

“What are you talking about?!” Ryuho shouted.

“That furnace wasn’t burning when we arrived. Since it’s lit now, something must be inside the fire!”

Hisame ran over to the hearth and blasted the fire with snow. However, the snow only melted, and the flames showed no signs of dying down.

“Gah!” Hisame exclaimed on the verge of tears. “Why didn’t that work?! Go away, flames! Disappear!”

“Get out of the way!” Ryuho bellowed, pushing Hisame aside. He jumped into the furnace, dug up the burning firewood, and pushed it to the side. Sparks popped as fire came into contact with his orange coat. “I found something, Hisame!”

There was an iron door at the bottom of the furnace. Ryuho yanked on the door with all his might, and the hinges snapped off. That done, he threw the door outside the hearth.

“Get over here!” Ryuho urged.

Hisame jumped into the furnace as well. His blue hair sizzled, producing an acrid smell. After clearing away the flames, he and Ryuho slipped into the space beneath the door. Stairs led downwards, and magical flames illuminated the path ahead of them. The shadows produced by the wavering flames writhed around like spirits of the dead. The ghastly sight caused Hisame to freeze in place.

“Let’s go!” Ryuho shouted while bounding down the stairs.

Hisame scrambled after him. *We need to find Angelina as soon as possible*, he thought. *Now’s not the time to be scared!*

As Ryuho continued charging forward without fear or hesitation, his orange coat appeared as radiant as the sun. Thus, Hisame continued racing after his back.

Chapter 6: Angelina and the Yulan Secret Arts

ANGELINA stood in front of a door. Opening it, she found a large tree growing from the ground. Sizeable, golden leaves formed the canopy. Small, blue fruits reminiscent of stars hung from the branches in clusters. Angelina looked upwards with wide eyes. The golden bell hung above her, and crepuscular rays spilled down from six arches.

“This is the bottom of the tower,” she mumbled to herself with a sigh. “The one shaped like a hexagonal prism.”

Angelina walked around the tree. Dry, golden leaves had formed piles around the circumference, softening the ground. After walking halfway around the tree, Angelina’s eyes widened again. A large marble platform etched with Yulan characters sank into the tree. The platform also had an incision that resembled a drawer. Despite having no knob, it did have a triangular keyhole. By all appearances, she could stick the Dagger of Mercy into the keyhole and use the handle as a knob.

Golden characters—most likely ancient Yulan—had been etched above the drawer. When Angelina held her magic bookmark above the characters, they were translated into the words, “Forgive us.” That was the secret incantation whose meaning had been lost, according to Phaenna.

“What does this mean?” Angelina muttered while cocking her head. “Did the royal family regret something?”

Since thinking would get her nowhere, she unsheathed her dagger and placed it in the keyhole. With a crack, a white fragment fell from above. After raising her head, Angelina rubbed her eyes, unable to believe what she saw.

A man stood atop the marble platform, partially embedded in the sparkling, golden trunk. The light filtering through the canopy illuminated his beautiful form. His blond hair was parted down the middle, falling straight down to his shoulder blades. His azure eyes were the same color as Angelina’s. He looked

similar to the troupe leader with the barrel organ. The only difference was the bright red stone glittering on his forehead, which shared the same shape as the Tianshi's Protective Seal. Clearly, the marble platform had been created to display him.

From the waist downwards, he was as white as a marble sculpture, as if his lower body had been coated with plaster. His upper body, however, resembled a flesh and blood person. That said, he wasn't human. Black wings grew from his back—the symbol of a fallen tianshi. Tragically, a dagger similar to Angelina's had been stabbed deep into the left side of his chest. White fluid reminiscent of milk spilled from the wound. That fluid had hardened, covering his lower body.

Is this the legendary fallen tianshi?! Angelina cried out internally, at a loss for words.

The tianshi donned a bitter smile while looking down at her. "Just a little longer, and I would have been free..."

Though his despair-inducing voice oozed hatred, his tenor was as beautiful as a heavenly melody. With a crack, another fragment of the stone covering his lower body peeled off and fell downwards. Angelina clambered up the marble platform, where white flakes had piled up around the fallen tianshi's feet.

"Are you okay?!" Angelina cried, heaving herself up over the lip of the platform. "How did you end up like this?!" As she approached the tianshi, the white stone flakes crunched beneath her feet and crumbled into dust. "This is terrible. What should I do? Would it be safe for me to pull the dagger from your chest...?"

The tianshi bellowed with laughter in response to Angelina's panicked expression. "You don't know anything, do you?" he asked, his lips twisting into an exasperated sneer. "Fool of a royal princess."

"I'm not the royal princess," she responded, looking up at him. "My name is Angelina. What's yours?"

"Successive queens have called me the Yulan Secret Arts for generations."

"Huh?" Angelina asked, cocking her head. "That's not a name, is it?"

The fallen tianshi glowered at her. "I am the Yulan Secret Arts. Your ancestors

are the ones who imprisoned me here. I would rather you didn't speak my true name."

"I don't believe it. Didn't the tianshi fall in love with the inaugural queen...?"

"That's right," he replied with a snort. "I fell in love with your ancestor, we had a child, and I became a fallen tianshi. However, we tianshi live far longer than you humans. When my wife crossed the gates of Heaven without me, I vowed to stay on Earth and protect our descendants. Don't you see, Angelina? You and I have the same eye color."

"You're my ancestor? Then how did you end up like this...?"

"I had the exact same thought! I loved my daughter. I protected my descendants. Nevertheless, they feared me." The tianshi began to roar, "Because I didn't age! Because of my powerful magic! Despite that, they bound me to this tree with sorcery to *steal* my power. Their seal prevents me from going anywhere. They bound me here with this accursed, cross-shaped wedge and siphoned my magic into a dagger!"

Without thinking, Angelina gripped the knife in her hand.

"Yes, the Dagger of Mercy," the tianshi confirmed. "Possessing that dagger is proof that you are Queen of Yule. It is also the magical artifact that steals my power."

This dagger had saved Angelina's life countless times up until now. All the while, she'd never known its dark secret.

"You merely want my power as well," the tianshi accused.

"I didn't come here to seal you away," Angelina responded.

The tianshi snorted. "Then why did you come here? Someone from Yule must have guided you, correct? How can you expect me to believe you?"

"I was told that the time-reversal sheet music is in Yule Castle. A little while ago, I met my mudder, and she directed me here."

"You mean Princess Phaenna—the young woman who never inherited my power."

"...Yes. So, I don't need anything other than the sheet music."

Hate darkened the fallen tianshi's eyes as he looked down at Angelina. "I never expected the cruel emperor to sacrifice himself for his daughter. Perhaps I should have taken parental love into account."

The tianshi's muttered words sank into the light and disappeared like soap bubbles.

"Then you *were* trying to reverse my time?" Angelina asked with a soft gasp.

The fallen tianshi nodded. "My curse finally came halfway undone. After so long, I was able to use magic for myself. Thus, I broke off a tree branch to fashion a wooden doll. I enchanted the doll to look human and launched it across the lake. Once the doll had sung and prophesied on my behalf, I sent the traveling performers to your home. So long as I killed the last queen, I would be free. I would only need to wait for this seal to weaken."

The fallen tianshi looked up at the ceiling, squinting in response to the glare. Dust motes danced in the light pouring from the windows.

"Angelina," he continued. "I would have gained my freedom if you hadn't been born. This curse will lift when the last queen dies. The magic finally deteriorated enough for me to move my upper body. Just a little while longer, and I would have been free..."

As the fallen tianshi slumped his head, Angelina glared up at him. "Return Fodder to normal!"

"Why?" he asked, returning his gaze to her. "He caused you so much anguish. If you open your heart in response to a small amount of kindness, you'll be used like me. They will drain every drop of goodwill from you."

"Fodder's not like that."

"You believe him? The cruel emperor who's scorned as a demon? He even killed his own father!"

Angelina nodded. She hadn't been able to trust her father until recently. Furthermore, the lavish presents he gave her always left her utterly confused. *But I understand now, she thought. He sings me lullabies and gives me expensive clothes woven with magic because he loves me. I can't doubt Father any longer. He put his life on the line to protect me, after all.*

"I'm my fodder's beloved daughter!" Angelina declared, looking up at the fallen tianshi.

"My descendants doubted my love," the fallen tianshi replied with a scowl. "They didn't believe me. They *couldn't* believe me!"

"...No. I don't think that's true! They probably couldn't believe in themselves! They were afraid of you abandoning them. I understand that, too. No matter how often Ryuho says he loves me, I'm still afraid of him hating me someday. For some reason, I don't think I'm worthy of love. I trust Ryuho, but I don't have confidence in myself. That's why I worry about him hating me someday."

The fallen tianshi's eyes widened as he regarded Angelina.

"Even so, your descendants shouldn't have bound you here," she continued. "That was wrong. They should have striven to be worthy of love!" Here, she balled her hand into a fist, her eyes burning with rage as she looked up at the fallen tianshi. "What do you want to do?"

"What good will come of hearing my desires? You'll lose the Yulan Secret Arts if you don't recast my seal, remember? In all likelihood, you won't be able to open the drawer containing the time-reversal sheet music."

Angelina hung her head, considering the matter thoroughly. *I want to save Father, but I want to help this tianshi as well. What's the correct decision? What should I do? Inheriting the secret arts would probably be best for Jinlong, Yule, and Father. Yet I would be robbing this tianshi of freedom by doing so. I would be using him and prolonging his suffering. Should I choose Father or someone I just met? Usually, a person would choose their father. Still, I can't just abandon this tianshi. What should I do...? Someone tell me the right answer.*

Thoughts continued swirling around Angelina's mind.

The ancient Yulan incantation translated to "Forgive us." The former queen must have felt guilty when she sacrificed this tianshi. She must have regretted her decision each time she used the secret arts. She prayed for his forgiveness the entire time despite believing she had no choice but to bind him. In that case...

"This could cost me everything, but..." After trailing off, Angelina lifted her

head. "But I'll try to open the drawer and free you at the same time."

The fallen tianshi smiled faintly. "You might be able to withdraw the sheet music, certainly, but you won't be able to inherit the secret arts."

"That's fine. I only want to save you and Fodder."

"You might not be able to cross the lake and return home either."

"Don't worry about that!" Angelina exclaimed, looking up at the fallen tianshi with a smile. "Hisame and Ryuho helped me out on the way here, too."

The fallen tianshi squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lip. If he relaxed his guard, tears would probably spill from his eyes. *I no longer wanted to trust humans, he thought. I no longer wanted to see light pink hair. I didn't care if the Yulan people were eradicated. Yet now...*

The fallen tianshi opened his eyes. A girl looked up at him with an earnest expression, her eyes the same azure as his. Her irises were the blue of Heaven—the home to which he could no longer return. Angelina's pure-hearted nature radiated from her gaze. She was the opposite of the fallen tianshi, who had lost the ability to even trust a child. His heart had become far more sullied than his blackened wings. When he realized that, the fallen tianshi looked away, unable to hold Angelina's gaze.

Angelina waited patiently as the fallen tianshi remained silent, not pressing him for an answer. At last, he took a deep breath, his lips quivering. Words he longed to speak but had remained unutterable began to rise from his throat. Nevertheless, he bit his lip and shook his head. He swallowed back the words, unable to speak them to the last princess—the progeny of his tormentors. As the skin of his dry lips cracked, blood seeped from the cut, the scent of iron tickling his nostrils.

Look what I've become, he thought. And yet, I still cling to life in this pathetic state. Can I do so from here on out? Will I remain like this forever?



The fallen tianshi balled his hand into a fist. Taking stock of himself caused him to despair. As his nails dug into his palm, Angelina touched his clenched fist. Her soft, warm fingers grazed his skin. She did nothing else, remaining silent.

So soft, the tianshi thought while gritting his teeth. How long has it been since I felt something so soft?

He recalled the face of his daughter, who had lived and died a long, long time ago. His daughter had inherited her mother's buoyant, light pink hair. On the other hand, her azure eyes had been identical to his. She'd laughed and cried quite often. The tianshi had taught his wife magic to ensure their daughter's happiness.

I was happy back then as well, he thought. How I longed to hold that soft warmth in my arms again.

As the tianshi unclenched his fist, Angelina caressed his fingers with great care. After taking a deep breath, he let forth a long and deep exhalation.

“Save me,” he mumbled. “I can’t take this any longer. I want to be free...”

“Okay,” Angelina replied. “I’ll save you.”

“My name is Rachiel. Please help me, Angelina.”

“Yeah, let’s set you free, Mishter Rachiel. What should I do?”

“Pull the wedge from my chest,” he instructed.

“The one shaped like a cross?”

“Yes, but you must do so with a partner. If the queen and prince consort of the Yulan royal family are not in agreement, you cannot remove this wedge. You must chant the secret incantation together and pull it out.”

As Rachiel finished speaking, Ryuho and Hisame raced into the room.

“Then I’ll do it!” Ryuho bellowed.

After turning around, Angelina hopped off the platform and hugged Ryuho.

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” Hisame said, embracing Angelina as well.

Thus, the three children rejoiced together in a ring.

“Sorry for worrying the two of you,” Angelina apologized.

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry!” Ryuho shouted before licking her on the cheek. He wrapped his tail around her, the gesture declaring that he would never let her go again. “I’m sorry for leaving you on your own! Did you cry? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“I’m fine,” Angelina said. “Thanks for coming, Ryuho. You too, Hisame.”

After shaking his head and flushing slightly, Hisame looked up at the platform. “Angelina. Is he the tianshi from the shadow puppet play...?”

“Yep,” Angelina responded with a nod.

She explained Rachiel’s situation to the others. Ryuho and Hisame furrowed their brows while listening to the cruel history of Yule.

“That’s why I’ve decided to free Mishter Rachiel,” Angelina concluded. “I want to open the drawer while removing the wedge.”

“But wouldn’t it be better to free Rachiel *after* taking out the sheet music and inheriting the secret arts?” Hisame suggested.

Rachiel stiffened in surprise and looked away.

“I can’t do that,” Angelina replied. “Mishter Rachiel’s been suffering for a long, long time. I can’t even begin to wrap my head around it. We can’t force him to wait any longer.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Hisame responded with an awkward smile. “That sounds like something you would say. So, what should we do?”

“Hop on my back, Lina,” Ryuho chimed in. “Let’s pull this wedge out together!”

“Huh?!” Hisame cried, shoving Ryuho to the side. “I’m much better suited to the task, Ryuho!”

“A Flame Tigger cannot remove this wedge,” Rachiel said. “He cannot become Angelina’s prince consort.”

After rubbing a paw under his nose with a smug chuckle, Ryuho transformed into a human. “See—I can turn into a person too!”

"If you decide to become human, you might not be able to turn into a tiger again," Hisame pointed out in a flustered tone. "Is that okay?"

Ryuho scowled. "I'm fine with being human if it means you don't become Lina's prince consort!"

Angelina's heart raced. "Are you okay deciding your future with so little thought?"

When a Flame Tiger decided to become human permanently, they could never assume their feline form again. Angelina knew how proud Ryuho was of being a tiger.

"I've been thinking about this a lot!" Ryuho countered, voice tinged with desperation as his ears and tail popped out. His gold and crimson eyes gleamed with light. "I like being a strong tiger, but I don't want to be your divine guardian beast. I want us to be closer to each other than anyone else for the rest of our lives!"

Angelina's cheeks burned, and her eyes widened. Had Ryuho just proposed to her?

"Do you not like me as a human?" Ryuho asked, his brow furrowed and his gaze sincere. As tears threatened to spill from his red eyes, his ears and tail drooped.

"Of course I do!" Angelina cried, squeezing Ryuho in her arms and patting his back. "I want to be with you forever and ever too!"

Hisame had to look away from the pair, for they were as brilliant as the sun. He didn't share that sort of bond with Angelina.

"Then it's decided!" Ryuho exclaimed while picking up Angelina. "I'll become a human! Flatten my ears one last time!"

"Okay!" After pressing her lips against his tiger ears, she whispered in farewell, "Bye-bye."

Ryuho had to suppress a laugh at the ticklish sensation.

"Li'l ears, li'l ears," Angelina chanted while gently pressing down on them. "Go back inside Ryuho."

With that, his tiger ears disappeared. His tail wagged one last time in reluctant farewell before disappearing with a puff of air.

“Are we good to go now?” Ryuho asked while looking up at Rachiel.

The fallen tianshi nodded.

Angelina imbued the Dagger of Mercy with her magic and handed it to Hisame. “When we remove the wedge, stick this dagger in the keyhole at the same time.”

“Okay,” Hisame replied, accepting the dagger reverently. “You can count on me.”

Ryuho climbed onto the platform while holding Angelina. He placed his hand on the wedge inserted into Rachiel’s chest.

“What’s the secret incantation, Lina?” Ryuho asked, bringing his ear close to her mouth. As her pink lips whispered the incantation, her faint breath rustled his red hair. Ryuho jolted with surprise, his face flushing.

In any event, Angelina gripped the wedge in her right hand, holding onto Ryuho with her left hand. Likewise, Ryuho gripped the wedge in his left hand, holding onto Angelina with his right arm.

“May this not cause you any pain!” Angelina cried out, the protective seal on her right palm glowing.

“Let’s pull this out in one go, Lina!” Ryuho shouted. “You ready, Hisame?”

As Angelina nodded, Hisame his took position in front of the keyhole, dagger in hand.

“Ready whenever you are,” Hisame confirmed.

Angelina and Ryuho met each other’s eyes, giving each other the go-ahead.

I’m sorry for all your suffering up ‘til now, Angelina thought. Please forgive us.

“Eas pa vichi!” Angelina and Ryuho cried out in unison.

As they yanked out the wedge, momentum caused them to slip off the platform. At the same time, Hisame stuck the dagger in the keyhole and twisted it around. The lock opened with a click, but upon seeing his friends falling,

Hisame removed his hands from the drawer and created a cushion of snow. When the pair fell onto the cushion with a soft thud, snow swirled up into the air.

Rachiel shone like a beam of light once free of the wedge. The plaster-like material covering him crumbled away with a series of sharp cracks. Now free, he flapped his black wings. At long last, he flew away from the tree he'd been bound to, soaring towards the top of the tower. He rang the bell while hanging from its rope, the loud peal echoing throughout the castle. All the while, he sang a song of joy, his midnight black wings turning as white as snow.

With Rachiel's magic no longer in effect, the protective sorcery around the castle started to dissipate. Sporadic holes opened in the rainbow-colored film, allowing water to flow in. The entire castle would flood in no time at all.

Hisame continued pulling on the dagger with all his might in an attempt to open the drawer. Unfortunately, the drawer didn't budge.

"Angelina!" he shouted. "This probably won't open for anyone but the queen!"

In a flash, Angelina raced over to Hisame and began pulling on the dagger with him. "Eas pa vichi!" she cried. "Eas pa vichi! Eas pa vichi!"

Despite her repeated invocations, the drawer remained firmly in place.

"I'm sorry!" Angelina wailed, still pulling on the dagger as if her life depended on it. "Please forgive us! I beg of you!" Unease gripped her heart as the drawer remained as stubborn as ever. "Is this because I didn't inherit the secret arts?"

I might have failed, she thought. I won't be able to save Father because I got too greedy!

"Don't give up, Lina!" Ryuho shouted, unleashing a stream of flame magic. "If you can't open it, I'll burn it down!"

Unlike before, he could now control fire in his human form. Even so, he couldn't suppress his panic. His flames were much weaker in human form than in feline form. Clinging to a small ray of hope, he tried transforming into a tiger again. To his great dismay, he failed. He'd lost his power as a holy beast.

“Damn it!” he swore. “I should’ve practiced magic more as a human!”

Ryuho launched fireballs at the marble recklessly. Though the marble glowed red when tinged with heat, it showed no signs of breaking. Even greater panic seized Ryuho. He could no longer do something that would have been so simple as a tiger.

“Stop!” Hisame cried. “Recklessness won’t accomplish anything!”

“Then what should I do?!” Ryuho shouted.

“Aim lower! Heat the dagger until it’s as hot as magma!”

“Got it!”

Though Ryuho didn’t understand Hisame’s orders, he still followed them. Hisame was smarter than him, after all. He’d studied sorcery at length and had very delicate control of magic. When Ryuho first met Hisame, his control had been so poor that he’d nearly frozen himself to death. Yet now, he could create something as fine as a snow cushion. Thus, Ryuho unleashed his hottest flames on the Dagger of Mercy.

Hisame focused his full attention on the blade, which had begun melting into a reddish-black substance. *I’ll use my and Ryuho’s power to cause a phreatic explosion, he thought. But anyone standing in the way might get caught up in the blast. I need Angelina to run away!*

“Take Angelina and run, Ryuho!” Hisame ordered. “I’m about to cause an explosion!”

“What’ll happen to you?!” Ryuho shouted.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll protect myself with an ice barrier.”

“No!” Angelina cried. “You have to come with us too, Hisame!”

If Hisame doesn’t flee with us, he might get hurt, she thought.

Regardless, Hisame ignored Angelina and continued giving orders. “Grab the sheet music if it flies up out of the drawer! Then we can meet up on the ice bridge!

“Let’s go, Lina!” Ryuho shouted.

“But...!”

“One of us needs to grab the sheet music! Have some faith in Hisame! He says he can do this, so he’ll do it!”

Angelina gasped. “Y-Yeah, you’re right! We’ll meet you up above, Hisame!”

Smiling, Hisame nodded and waved at them.

Ryuho took Angelina’s hand and exited the tower. Unlike before, they climbed up the tower’s outer stairs rather than down. After climbing up one floor, they looked inside the tower from a window.

“We’re ready, Hisame!” Ryuho shouted.

“Hit the dagger with your flames one last time!” Hisame cried.

With a nod, Ryuho launched an enormous fireball at the dagger.

Hisame looked back up at them with a smile. “Duck and cover!”

Angelina obeyed, lying face down on the stairs. Ryuho laid down on top of her to protect her. Meanwhile, Hisame melted the ice in his hands into cool water. He blasted the water onto the dagger, which had melted into a magma-like substance. A roar thundered across the tower, and the dagger exploded in a phreatic eruption. Fire magic, ice magic, and Angelina’s magic mixed in a chaotic jumble, destroying the marble. Miraculously, the sheet music blew upwards along with the blast. As Angelina leaned through the window and held out her right hand, Ryuho held onto her waist to prevent her from falling.

“Fodder!” Angelina cried. “Please return to normal, Fodder!”

Upon hearing this plea, Rachiel turned around. He dove into the blast, grabbed the sheet music, and handed it to Angelina.

“Angelina,” he said.

“...Mishter Rachiel?”

“Thank you.”

Afterward, Rachiel soared toward the top of the tower and took to the skies. Back on the stairs, Angelina peered down at the bottom of the tower. She wanted to confirm Hisame’s safety, but due to the blast, a mound of collapsed

rubble obstructed her view.

“Oh crap,” Ryuho said. “If the tower collapses, the bridge will break too.”

“Hisame!” Angelina cried.

She and Ryuho could do nothing but wait.

Please, please be okay, Angelina thought. If you’re still here, please save Hisame, Mother! After taking the matching amulet from her waist, Angelina gripped it in her folded hands as she prayed.



THE phreatic explosion had blown Hisame against the wall, rendering him immobile. As water flowed into the crumbling tower, he began floating on its cold surface.

It’s so cold, he thought as the frigid water rocked him back and forth. But swaying with the waves feels nice. I’m exhausted...

He didn’t feel like swimming at all. After expending all his magic and stamina, he had no energy left to spare.

What will my family think if I die here? Hisame wondered, recalling his parents and siblings in Anda. They’ll probably laugh and say, “Studying abroad in Jinlong was too much for him, after all.” Maybe they’ll be happy that the most useless of us is dead. Even so, Angelina will probably be sad. I bet she’ll always remember me. Becoming one of her memories wouldn’t be so bad. Still, I would have mocked someone for sacrificing themselves like this in the past.

Hisame smiled. Back in Anda, he’d always retreated into his shell for fear of being hurt. He’d perceived even his family as enemies, and merely protecting himself had taken his full effort. As such, he’d viewed sacrificing oneself for others as sanctimonious.

That said, meeting Angelina had changed him. Without knowing Hisame’s status, Angelina laughed, commiserated, and even dirtied herself with him as if it were natural. Ryuho had influenced him as well. Angelina and Ryuho shared everything. Though cutting everything in half should have reduced their enjoyment, they always seemed happier than Hisame. Before long, Hisame had

decided to start sharing his enjoyment with others as well.

When Angelina laughed, Hisame shared her happiness. When she cried, his heart ached with her. When Ryuho bounced around in high spirits, Hisame's mood brightened with him. By spending time with them, Hisame learned the joy of sharing his emotions with others. As a result, his excruciating life had become much brighter and enjoyable.

I don't regret my decision, Hisame thought. This was the only path that could make everyone happy.

Angelina and Ryuho flashed across Hisame's mind. Even as a fellow boy, Hisame admired Ryuho's strength and decisiveness. He and Angelina were a good match.

You'll be okay without me, Angelina. Plenty of people love you. You won't lack for anything even when I'm gone.

The amulet at Hisame's waist—which formed a matching pair with Angelina's—swayed in the water. He smiled while remembering how delightful the festival had been.

No, my life wasn't so bad. I was happy.

At that moment, the water around Hisame grew pleasantly warm. As his eyes cracked open, he spotted a beautiful woman with azure eyes floating on the water's surface.

If a female tianshi existed, she would probably look like this woman. No, she looks like an adult version of Angelina.

"Where would you like to go?" the woman asked.

Her voice sounded similar to Angelina's as well. In any case, the chalk marks drawn by Hisame on their way here began floating in the water. The marks formed a path leading back to the lake's surface. Thus, Hisame pointed to the markings.

But going back to the surface now would be impossible.

"Don't give up," the woman said. "Angelina would surely regret losing you."

Angelina appeared in Hisame's mind again. Tears spilled from her azure eyes

as she blamed herself for Hisame's death.

That's right—I can't give up! Hisame cried out internally with a sharp intake of breath. *Angelina will blame herself if I die. Plus, Anda will have a reason to invade Jinlong! I have to live! I have to!*

Flowing, light pink hair filled Hisame's vision. The woman beckoned to him with a wave, her arm pale and willowy. At that moment, the water flowed away from Hisame. The rainbow film that had protected the castle now enfolded him. Then, the film began to float in the air, following the chalk marks.

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RYUHO glared at the lake's surface. The tower would collapse at any moment. If they didn't return to the shore as soon as possible, the bridge would probably collapse, too.

"Let's go," he said. "We can't wait any longer."

"But Hisame..." Angelina trailed off.

Ryuho fell silent, biting his lip. He didn't want to abandon Hisame either, but at this rate, he and Angelina would sink into the monster-infested lake. Neither of them had the power to maintain the ice bridge.

If only we'd listened to Hisame, Ryuho thought with a pang of regret. They should have ignored Rachiel's desires, momentarily resealing him and taking the sheet music. Hisame's suggestions were always level-headed and prudent. He'd been correct, regardless of whether his words had been difficult to swallow. *Our decision killed Hisame,* Ryuho realized, balling his hand into a fist. *If I screw up again, I might lose Lina too. I can't let that happen, no matter what!*

"Lina!" Ryuho shouted while picking her up. "We have to go!"

"But—"

"No, we can't wait any longer!"

Angelina pointed to the water's surface from inside Ryuho's arms. "But look over there!"

Hisame floated towards the surface while enveloped in a large, round bubble.

“He made it!” Ryuho shouted, diving into the lake without the slightest hesitation.

Despite his hatred of water, Ryuho fought to push the bubble onto the ice bridge. Immediately, a monstrous fish attacked him.

“Ryuho!” Angelina cried.

Ryuho launched a fireball at the fish, scorching it. The fish let forth an unpleasant screech and leapt into the air. A shadow fell across the ice bridge as if a large cloud had covered the sky. Overcome with fear, Angelina bent down, covered her head, and squeezed her eyes shut. With a loud splash, the monstrous fish fell back into the lake. At the same time, the ice bridge began rocking noisily.

It’s going to break in half! Angelina cried out internally. *What should I do?! I have to save Ryuho and Hisame!*

“Stand up!” Angelina squealed, slapping her thighs. “Come on!”

Without warning, she shot into the air, her stomach dropping. The next moment, she was flung into a basket woven from wisteria. As she tried to process that in a daze, Ryuho fell into the basket as well. Gaping, Angelina lifted her head. A golden, serpentine underbelly sparkled above her.

“Mishter Dragon!” she cried.

The guardian deity responded with a boisterous laugh.

Ryuho stood up inside the basket and looked outside. “Where’s Hisame?!”

“He’s fine,” the dragon replied with another hearty laugh.

He was holding Hisame—still inside the bubble—in his hands. Before long, he carefully sat all three of them down on the lakeside. Upon seeing this, the Jinlongian forces led by Yuen raised a cheer.

After picking up Angelina, Ryuho called out, “Yuen! Take Lina!” Carrying her out of the basket would be much harder in his human form. Without delay, Yuen did as requested.

Meanwhile, Angelina looked around for Hisame from inside Yuen’s arms. Hisame was lying on his back, still enveloped by the film. The Golden Dragon

was using his body to hold Hisame down, as the film sphere seemed liable to roll away.

“Hisame!” Angelina cried, relief washing over her. “Let me down, Yuen! I need to go see Hisame!”

Nodding, Yuen knelt beside Hisame and let Angelina down.

“Hisame!” Angelina cried out again, placing a hand on the bubble. The springy membrane showed no signs of bursting. Hisame trembled and went limp, his lips purple.

“Mishter Dragon!” Angelina squealed. “How can we get Hisame out of there?”

“I do not know,” he replied. “That is Yulan magic.”

The blood drained from Angelina’s face. “What should I do...? I’m not familiar with Yulan magic either.”

She no longer had the Dagger of Mercy, which had dispelled the protective magic around the castle. Unsure what else to do, she raised her head and looked into the forest. Yulan citizens glowered back at her from deep within the trees.

“Are any of you familiar with Yulan magic?!?” she called out. “Do any of you know how to break this spell?!?”

“The Yulan Secret Arts are reserved for our queen,” one of them spat in response. “If you didn’t inherit the secret arts, you’re no ruler of ours. Why would we listen to your request?!?”

“That’s right!” someone else agreed. “Why would we help anyone from Jinlong?! You stole our country, kidnapped Princess Phaenna, and now you’ve destroyed our castle for good!”

Angelina took a reflexive step backward in response to their enmity.

“Shut the hell up!” Ryuho bellowed. “A kid’s about to die! What does this have to do with politics?!?”

“You think someone will save you if you shout?!?” an old man countered. “We Yulans sought help too. We lost our country, our homes were stolen, and our

children perished. Even then, no one saved us! If you're truly Phaenna's daughter and the new queen, save the boy yourself!"

Both Ryuho and Yuen flinched in response to the Yulan man's cries of lamentation.

"Mudder," Angelina prayed, gripping the dagger's remaining sheathe. "Please lend me your strength!"

A bell tolled from the crumbling castle, issuing a loud peal followed by a deep, resonant clang. When this repeated three times, the Yulan citizens looked up at the sky.

"This toll marks the birth of a new queen..." one of them mumbled.

Angelina looked up at the sky as well. There, she spotted Rachiel, his pure white wings unfurled. The Yulan citizens looked up at him with wide eyes and slack jaws.

Moments later, the tianshi alighted before Angelina. "Princess," he said, placing his hand on top of hers, which still gripped the sheathe. "I would like to form a new contract with you."

The sheathe transformed into a beautiful conductor's baton. Red stones forming the Tianshi's Protective Seal had been embedded in the silver baton.

"Angelina," he said. "Use that baton to bring about the future you desire!"

Nodding, Angelina whipped the baton through the air. The sound of spring wind resounded from the baton, and the bubble enveloping Hisame disappeared with a pop.

"Hisame!" Angelina cried, racing over to him. After helping him sit up, she cast healing magic on him. Ryuho dashed over to them and rubbed Hisame's back to warm him. Slowly, Hisame's lips curled into a smile.

"Is that you, Angelina...?" he mumbled. "I'm glad you're safe."

"Yeah, and it's all thanks to you," Angelina replied, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I'm so, so glad you're safe!"

"You idiot," Ryuho said, hanging his head while rubbing Hisame's back vigorously. "Don't make us worry like that, ya big dummy!"

“I’m sorry,” Hisame apologized. “Please don’t be mad at me, Ryuho.”

Yuen watched the three children embracing each other with a smile. At the same time, Rachiel bit his lip while standing in front of them. He’d also been blessed with loved ones in the distant past.

I was happy back then, he recalled. I never considered using time-reversal magic to return to the days before my fall from Heaven. How I loved my wife and daughter. I would have exchanged anything to protect their happiness.

Rachiel could hardly behold the radiant children as he waxed nostalgic.

“Is that you, Lord Rachiel...?” one of the Yulan citizens asked in a tone of adoration. All of them fell to their knees, folding their hands in prayer while looking up at him. Nevertheless, Rachiel glared down at them scornfully. His sky-blue eyes seemed capable of seeing through everything. Ignoring the trembling Yulans, he turned back towards Angelina.

“Princess Angelina,” he said. “I promise you the divine protection of a tianshi. Call my name if you are ever in trouble. I will come to your rescue any time.”

“Thank you so much, Mishter Rachiel!”

The tianshi lowered his head. “Forgive me for being cruel.” When Angelina shook her head, Rachiel continued, “Allow me to grant you one wish.”

Angelina furrowed her brow. “Um...” she trailed off, looking around the area. She couldn’t think of a wish off the top of her head.

As she puzzled over the matter, Marfa’s mother cried out, “Lord Rachiel! Please restore the land of Yule—I beg of you!”

“Where do you get off speaking my name?” Rachiel answered with a snort.

“Forgive me, but I speak on behalf of all Yulans. If you would please listen to me instead of the young queen...”

“Stop acting so self-important. Besides, I’ve given my protection to *Angelina*, not the Queen of Yule.” Rachiel spoke those emotionless words in a clear tenor. Though his words were cold, he still sounded beautiful. “So?” Rachiel asked, kneeling before Angelina. “What is your wish?”

Angelina grew flustered. Rachiel’s kind demeanor was the opposite of his

earlier conduct. Before, he'd been as cold as the ice in the castle. Now, he was acting like a doting father. Angelina had no idea how to respond to the sudden change. Regardless, she thought about possible wishes.

I do need to solve Yule's problems, of course, but I can't ask Rachiel to save the nation that caused his suffering. Plus, I'm not sure what kind of wishes he can grant.

"Um," Angelina mumbled. "Um... I got it! Please teach me Yulan magic!"

Despite being proud of her idea, Rachiel merely laughed. "Nope. I would have done that without you asking. Therefore, it's not a wish."

"Huh?" Angelina asked, unsure how to respond to the rejection. "Well, uh... O-Okay then! Please teach me how to sing!"

"No again," Rachiel answered with a chuckle, mussing Angelina's hair. "Teaching you to sing goes without saying as well. You truly are a child devoid of greed. Well then, how about this? I'll quell the small border skirmishes."

"You can do that?" Angelina asked, positively beaming.

"A small skirmish or two shouldn't be too much to handle."

"Then please do that, Mishter Rachiel!"

When Angelina bowed her head, Rachiel patted the back of her hair.

"What's that about?!" Ryuho shouted, his expression sour as he threw his arms around Angelina. "Don't act like you two are best friends all of a sudden!"

"I'm only kind to those I'm fond of," Rachiel answered with a smile while standing up.

He unfolded his wings to their full extent. The white feathers bore no trace of their former blackness. His past as a fallen tianshi had been erased. Thus, he soared into the blue sky, his large, powerful wings flapping without hesitation. Small, white feathers floated downwards against the backlighting, grazing Angelina's nose.

"Here you go," Ryuho said, inserting one of the feathers behind Angelina's ear. "You're just like a tianshi now!" He grinned from ear to ear, a tail no longer protruding from his lower back.

The autumn sky stretched as far as the eye could see. Rachiel disappeared into the clouds, which might have been splashed across the heavens with a paintbrush. Angelina continued waving until he vanished from sight.

Chapter 7: Angelina and the Time-Reversal Sheet Music

AFTER obtaining the time-reversal sheet music, Angelina and company returned to the North Star Sanctuary. When Kyril greeted her with open arms, Angelina jumped into his embrace without hesitation. She'd put indecisiveness behind her.

Tomi was holding Feilong. Upon seeing Angelina, the young boy breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness..." he mumbled.

As Tomi smiled at those words, Junshi prepared the barrel organ. At last, Angelina placed the time-reversal sheet music in the instrument.

"Are you ready?" she asked while looking at Feilong. "We won't play the music if you're against it, Fodder."

Kyril and Junshi regarded Feilong anxiously. If Feilong didn't want to return to normal, Kyril would respect his wishes. The young prince had already resolved to take over the empire. Nevertheless, losing Feilong as a father would be sad, as they'd finally developed a proper parent-child relationship.

Feilong looked around the room. Everyone was staring at him worriedly. When Angelina decided to retrieve the sheet music, Tomi had divulged everything. Feilong now knew what awaited him in the future and what atrocities he would commit. His trustworthy uncle hadn't treated him like a child, revealing every detail.

Even so, Feilong didn't understand the explanation very well. Had that strange account really been about him? It sounded more like a fairy tale than reality. Though he didn't fully grasp what *remembering* entailed, he still wanted to remember Angelina and Kyril. Angelina had gone on a journey to return him to normal at great personal risk. Feilong also knew how busy Kyril was in the emperor's absence. Despite their youth, Angelina and Kyril were pushing themselves to the limit, hoping to see Feilong as an adult. That filled him with joy, and he wanted to grant their wish.

Moreover, Feilong had realized something as an intuitive child. Pain hid behind Kyril and Angelina's smiles despite acting like they were enjoying themselves. Presumably, they missed their father. Feilong understood the pain of being unable to see someone you missed all too well.

They want me to return to normal so much, Feilong thought. I must have been a good father. Once I remember everything, they won't be sad anymore. The three of us will be happy together.

Thus, Feilong exhaled deeply and raised his head. "Play the organ."

Tomi set Feilong down behind the organ. Then, Junshi draped adult robes around him to prepare for the boy's growth spurt. Angelina took Feilong's hand with a tearful expression. His decision to return to normal filled her with happiness.

"Fodder," she said. "Let's crank the handle together."

"Okay, Lina."

As Angelina and Feilong gripped the crank together, Kyril watched them from behind. When the sheet music started spinning, the mechanical dolls moved as well. A pink ribbon of light overflowed from the organ, the musical vibrations taking on color—the gentle tone spread throughout the room. The dark, mournful tune gave way to an intense, frightening rhythm. Then, the heartrending melancholy disappeared, and a warm melody filled the air. The ribbon of light enveloped Feilong, circling the area. Finally, the music grew louder, and Feilong vanished from sight within the luminescence.

"Fodder!" Angelina cried, reaching towards the light.

Kyril pressed her hand back down on the crank. "Have a little patience, Lina. The spell won't complete if we interrupt the magic."

"But—"

"I know. I'm worried, too."

Kyril's hand also trembled as he held down Angelina's. He was anxious as well. In any case, Angelina's hand rested atop Feilong's, and Kyril's hand rested atop hers.

“Okay, I’ll be patient,” she said.

Please, please return to normal! Angelina prayed for her father’s safety. We need you!



FEILONG remembered his entire life as he listened to the music. As a young boy, his father had persecuted him and his mother. Later, he’d obtained the Inverted Scale to win his father’s acknowledgment. However, this had only increased the severity of his father’s hatred. After his mother’s murder, he’d attempted to rip out the scale countless times while living in hiding. At last, he’d met Phaenna, gaining a brief moment of happiness.

However, his brother had threatened to steal even that joy from him. In response, Feilong had become a demon. He’d killed his father, his brother, and his entire family. In the end, he usurped the Jinlongian throne, establishing a position that no one could threaten.

Yet Phaenna had died no sooner than they’d obtained happiness as a family.

Feilong had killed his family and stolen the empire for Phaenna’s sake. *Was I merely chasing after the wind this whole time?* he’d lamented, directing his rage at Angelina. *If only this girl hadn’t been born.* Fury and reason had warred inside him as he’d considered killing her. Ultimately, he’d treated her as though she didn’t exist.

When he remembered everything, Feilong could hardly breathe, for he was so aghast. *I never went to see her—no, not once—before that day, he thought. I never considered checking in on her living conditions, either. When I finally went to see her, it wasn’t out of interest in my daughter. I never even gave her a name, after all. I know for myself how children abandoned by their parents must survive. And yet I still—*

Memories whirled inside Feilong’s head. The rundown storage shed in which Angelina had lived. Her emaciated body and shabby clothes not befitting a princess. Her rough skin. How she’d fearfully protected her head when someone reached out their hand.

What I did was unforgivable. I don’t deserve forgiveness!

No matter how much love and luxury Feilong had provided for Angelina, she still hadn't opened up to him. That had always caused him a great deal of grief.

But who could blame her? I'm in no position to ask Angelina to trust me. No, I deserve punishment instead.

Despite remembering his past, he still didn't forget the events following his transformation into a child. Kyril had cherished him like a little brother. Angelina had looked at him with eyes full of kindness. Though it was frustrating and embarrassing, Feilong had even sought Ryuho's affection. All of them had slept next to each other in a line. Feilong's children had picked him up, and he'd hugged them back. Likewise, his children had patted his head and cooled his food. They'd done everything for him that he'd failed to do as a father.

They'd given him love.

Angelina did for me what I never did for her.

The events of Angelina's journey flowed into Feilong's mind. After visiting the Bai Ze, she'd freed the fallen tianshi of Yule Castle to retrieve the sheet music. Feilong gaped as he observed his daughter fighting and risking death for his sake.

Why would Angelina put her life on the line for such a horrible father? Feilong gripped his robes to hide his now adult body, squeezing himself with both arms. What kind of expression should I even wear when I look at my daughter? Feilong recoiled as the ribbon of light grew fainter. I shouldn't have remembered my past. In fact, I should have died when the time-reversal spell struck me. Would Lina have forgiven me then...?

The music grew softer, and the ribbon of light began to unravel. Feilong could see his children peering at him from crevices in the luminescence. He couldn't bear to meet their gazes, for their eyes were too pure. Thus, he merely hung his head. The music stopped, and only a trailing note lingered in the air.



NOW an adult, Feilong sat behind the organ while wrapped in robes.

"Fodder!" Angelina cried, throwing her arms around him.

Feilong stiffened, his eyes widening. As he remained silent, unsure what to do, Angelina looked at him anxiously.

“Fodder?” she asked. “Do you remember me? Did it not work?”

“It worked,” he answered, looking into her watery, azure eyes and shaking his head. “I remember everything.”

“Then why won’t you hug me?” Angelina pressed in a trembling voice, clearly on the verge of tears. “Are you mad that I caused all this?”

Feilong gasped. “N-No...”

He couldn’t speak properly. The air in his lungs had frozen, and his windpipe had constricted. It hurt to even breathe.

“I’m not angry,” Feilong said, wringing out the words stuck inside his chest. “But why would you help me when I caused you so much misery?” Feilong hugged himself even tighter, his nails digging into his arms. “You should’ve just abandoned me.”

For a moment, Angelina had no idea what to say. Then, she squeezed Feilong in her arms and said, “Fodder.”

“I have no right to feel your embrace,” he answered. “What I did to you was unforgivable. Punish me, Lina.”

Angelina pressed her forehead against Feilong’s and shook her head. “You sacrificed yourself to protect me.”

“I only did what’s expected of a father...”

And only after I failed as a father for so long, Feilong thought.

Angelina wanted to cry as she watched regret torment Feilong. Remembering everything had racked him with guilt. He could no longer look at Angelina with a clear conscience, as he’d done earlier.

“That’s not true,” Angelina said. “You did more than what’s expected.”

Some parents couldn’t love their children, and some children couldn’t love their parents. Likewise, some people didn’t know how to express their love. In previous lives, Angelina had even rejoiced over her father and brother’s deaths

rather than mourning them. Sadly, familial bonds didn't guarantee unconditional love. Having a family that cared about you was a miracle. As such, Angelina cherished the present moment.

Now's my chance, she thought. *I have to tell him what I regretted being unable to say.*

"I love you, Fodder," Angelina said in a nasal voice. "Sorry for not being able to say it until now..."

Feilong lifted his head. Seeing Angelina's tear-stained face flustered him.

"Will you hug me like you did when you were little?" Angelina asked.

"Lina... I'm sorry."

As Feilong acted perplexed, Kyril hugged him from behind. "You should say *thank you* during times like this, Father."

Feilong's chest warmed in response to Kyril's words, his frozen lungs beginning to thaw. Hesitantly, he wrapped his arms around Angelina, who relaxed and leaned into him.

"Thank you, Angelina," Feilong said.

Angelina responded with a silent smile and nod.

"And thank you, Kyril," Feilong added, rubbing him on the back with one arm.

Kyril embraced his father even tighter. "I'm just glad you're safe."

Feilong wrapped his children in a hug, wringing out his next words in a trembling voice. "I love both of you... so, so much."

Chapter 8: Angelina's Place to Call Home

KYRIL was heading towards the Celestial Axe Tower. Feilong had returned to normal without issue. However, Tomi said he needed a little more rest before resuming government duties. As Kyril and Yuen continued walking together, they came upon a group of Jinlongian nobles waiting for them.

“Blood of the imperial line,” one of them greeted, bowing with his hands locked in front of his chest. “Thou cometh from above the lightning bolts of the rain clouds. Thou doth possess the scale of the Golden Dragon. May the blessings of Heaven be upon ye, Crown Prince Kyril—young dragon of Jinlong.”

Kyril glanced at the nobles. These men had begun probing into his affairs ever since Feilong stopped visiting the tower. One of them had even advised Kyril to marry.

Yuen took a step forward. “What business do you have?”

“Nothing too onerous,” a nobleman said. “If possible, we would like to visit Emperor Feilong, as His Majesty has been resting for quite some time.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Kyril answered.

The noblemen grinned, flattery oozing from their expressions as they regarded Kyril. “But we haven’t even glimpsed Emperor Feilong as of late,” one of them said. “Is His Majesty truly convalescing? With all due respect, a single audience would put our minds at ease.”

Yuen furrowed his brow in displeasure. “Is Crown Prince Kyril’s administration making you uneasy?”

“Not at all!” the nobleman cried, clearly flustered. “According to rumor, the Bai Ze appeared recently. How could any of us be worried? We were particularly impressed with Prince Kyril when the border skirmishes died down as well. However, the Bai Ze’s appearance has us wondering if the dynasty has changed.”

The nobleman donned an oily smile, his gaze testing Kyril. Yuen's temper flared. They were trying to find out if Feilong had died in a roundabout manner.

"Are you asking whether His Majesty still lives?" Kyril asked, staring back at the noblemen impassively.

"We aren't blaming you, Prince Kyril. Wanting to hide a sudden misfortune is understandable. However, why not announce the change in dynasties rather than hide it? We are still your loyal retainers, even after His Majesty's death. It seems as though you're calling our devotion into question by hiding the truth from us."

Despite feigning humility in their speech, the noblemen wore domineering expressions.

These aren't the faces of loyal retainers, Kyril thought with a sigh.

"You don't believe me when I say His Majesty is resting?" he asked.

"Of course we believe you," the nobleman responded. "If His Majesty is convalescing from an illness, there are ways in which we can help, such as through prayer. But first, we would appreciate an audience. We are very worried, after all."

The noblemen were attempting to throw Kyril off balance through kind words. Suddenly, a voice cold enough to freeze the air rang out around them.

"Is that so? I never knew you had such admirable intentions."

The noblemen turned in the direction of the voice, their eyes widening. Feilong stood there with Angelina in his arms. His silver hair fluttered in the wind, and a chill radiated from his scornful, icy blue eyes. A shroud of winter seemed to hang solely around the emperor.

After shrinking into themselves, the noblemen threw themselves into deep bows. "Blood of the imperial line—"

"Enough," Feilong interrupted. "I don't require greetings from simpletons who don't know the difference between rest and convalescence."

He was the picture of the cruel emperor, his hand on his sword and a smile on his face. His very presence overwhelmed others. The noblemen couldn't

breathe, even though he wasn't even using magic.

"I won't suffer fools in my palace," Feilong spat.

His menacing aura was as terrifying as a black dragon rearing its head. Such words from the cruel emperor implied the death penalty. In the worst-case scenario, their entire families could be executed. In fact, Feilong had killed his own family without batting an eye when usurping the throne.

The blood drained from the noblemen's faces, their visions growing dark. Legs trembling, they fell to their knees.

"Spare my life at the very least," one begged.

"Spare my family at the very least," another pleaded.

As they both pressed their foreheads against the ground, Feilong glanced at Kyril. "I leave their punishment to you."

The emperor left with a single flap of his cape. Meanwhile, Kyril turned his gaze back on the noblemen, still prostrating themselves with foreheads on the ground. Their cocksure attitudes from minutes ago now seemed like a poor joke.

This is Father's power, Kyril thought. He can control people through fear. It's certainly easy to understand, but I'm not capable of doing the same.

When Kyril sighed, the noblemen jolted, their bodies trembling.

"I'm placing you both under house arrest and ordering your retirement," Kyril said.

Though their political careers had been cut short, no harm would come to their lives or families. The noblemen raised their tear-stained faces in response to Kyril's benevolent decision.

"Thank you so much, Crown Prince Kyril!" one cried out.

"Yes, thank you so much!" the other agreed.

"However, this is your last warning," Kyril added sternly.

The noblemen prostrated themselves again. "Yes, Your Highness!"

Kyril turned his back on the noblemen and chased after Feilong. "Are you

returning to work today, Father?" he asked.

"No, I'm just taking a walk with Angelina."

Angelina smiled awkwardly inside Feilong's arms. "You were both pretty amazing back there."

"After everything we said, they shouldn't make any moves for a while," Feilong said with a snort. "But Kyri..."

Kyri stiffened, preparing for a lecture. *Is Father going to chastise me for being too lenient? he wondered. Perhaps my methods would prevent the government from running smoothly.*

Kyri hung his head. A few moments later, however, he felt a large, warm hand mussing his hair.

"You did a good job keeping the vipers at bay until now," Feilong said. "I'm proud of you."

Kyri lifted his head, wearing a cheerful, if somewhat awkward, smile. "Thank you!" he exclaimed. Receiving praise from his father lifted a weight from his shoulders.

As tears formed in the outer corners of his eyes, Angelina smiled and said, "Good for you, Big Brudder."

"Well then, let's make our way to the Celestial Axe Tower," Feilong said with an indomitable smile. "More than a few people need a taste of the dragon's lightning."

"Your face looks scary, Fodder," Angelina noted with a laugh.

Kyri laughed with her, and Yuen smirked.

The entire group looked up at the Celestial Axe Tower—the tallest nine-tiered structure in Jinlong. The blue autumn sky stretched as far as the eye could see. As a result, the black tiles sparkled like rain-soaked crow feathers in the sunlight.



AFTER returning from Yule, Ryuho and Hisame were provided with their own

rooms in the North Star Sanctuary. Ryuho was given a room befitting a prince since he could no longer transform into a Flame Tiger. Unlike his last room, it was furnished with human amenities such as a desk, a normal bed, and so forth.

Ryuho and Hisame had been given rooms as a reward for risking their lives for Angelina. In other words, Jinlong was implicitly placing their trust in these two foreign princes.

Hisame had been wounded and exhausted following the fierce battle in Yule. Of course, Angelina was able to mend Hisame's wounds with her healing magic. Even so, Hisame's magical energy had been drained since he'd used an enormous amount of sorcery all at once. His stamina had been depleted as well. In the end, Kyril ordered Hisame to rest in the North Star Sanctuary. They couldn't send Hisame home in his current state, after all.

Angelina sat on the side of Hisame's bed, diligently caring for him. "Open wide, Hisame."

Hisame obeyed without complaint despite the blush creeping up his cheeks. A moment later, Angelina brought a spoonful of rice porridge to his wide-open mouth. The scent of ginger wafted from the bowl, and the red wolfberries were as bright as rubies. Best of all, steam rose from the fluffy, pure white rice. All of them whetted Hisame's appetite.

It's warm and sweet, he thought.

Warmth spread from his core as he ate the porridge. The chicken had been cooked to tender perfection. Strangely, the porridge fed by Angelina's hand caused power to well up inside him. Perhaps it was a result of her healing magic. In any case, an entirely new sense of euphoria swelled within his chest.

No one worried about sick people in Anda. Injuries and infirmities were one's own responsibilities. If a person fell ill, they were often mocked for being weak of mind or body. As a result, Hisame's heart sang with joy at receiving bedside care for the first time.

"This porridge is so good..." Hisame mumbled.

"Really?" Angelina asked, breaking out into a smile. "I helped make it! Eat as much as you can, okay?"

Still beaming, Angelina brought the next spoonful of porridge to Hisame's lips. Again, he accepted it without complaint. At that moment, the door slammed open, and Ryuho entered the room.

"Huh?!" he shouted, exploding with discontent from the outset. "What's going on here?! That's not fair, Hisame!"

Hisame continued chewing the food, ignoring Ryuho. He opened his mouth like a baby bird to ask for the next spoonful, which Angelina obliged. Fuming, Ryuho stomped over to the bed and slumped down next to Angelina.

"Let's be quiet, Ryuho," Angelina chided him. "Okay?"

Ryuho puffed out his cheeks. "Hisame can eat by himself, right?!" he shouted in a huff. "You don't have to feed him! It's not fair!"



Hisame lowered his head and suppressed a laugh, finding Ryuho's actions rather comical. At the same time, he felt a slight sense of superiority.

"Do you want to feed Hisame too?" Angelina asked, offering the spoon to Ryuho. "Go ahead!"

"Hell no! Why would I *ever* want to do that?!"

Hisame burst out laughing. Seeing him double over with laughter, Angelina and Ryuho exchanged glances.

"Gah!" Ryuho shouted, bristling with anger. "What's so funny?!"

"It's nothing," Hisame answered, wiping tears of laughter from the outer corners of his eyes. "I'm just happy."

Angelina held out another spoonful of porridge while cocking her head. "Here you go, Hisame. Say, 'Aaah.'"

Hisame opened wide again, showing off to Ryuho. "Aaaaah."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about!" Ryuho exclaimed. "Not fair!"

"How is it unfair?" Angelina asked. "You just ate, right? If you want porridge, you can have it for your next meal, okay?"

"I'm not talking about porridge! I want you to feed me, too!"

"Then we can do that another time, all right?"

"That's still not what I'm talking about..." Ryuho grumbled. His tiger ears probably would have been drooping if he still had them.

"It's not?" Angelina asked, gazing at Ryuho with her azure eyes.

Ryuho looked away, unsure how to respond. He didn't want to tell Angelina the truth since he knew he was being selfish. At the same time, he wanted her to understand.

"I mean..." he trailed off.

Hisame tittered as he understood Ryuho's feelings well. "Ryuho doesn't like that you're feeding me."

"Gah!" Ryuho bellowed. "Don't spill my secrets when I'm doing my best to be

patient, you idiot!"

"Is that what this is about?" Angelina asked. "Sorry, Ryuho, but Hisame used up all his magic energy, remember? I'm doing this to share my energy with him."

"Really?" Hisame asked.

As Angelina held the spoon with her right hand, the Tianshi's Protective Seal sparkled on her palm. Both Ryuho and Hisame looked at it, surprised.

"You're doing this to share your magic?" Hisame pressed.

"Yep!" Angelina responded with a nod. "I want you to get healthy as soon as possible. That way, the three of us can play together again!"

Angelina's nonchalant smile was enough to make Hisame cry tears of joy. *So this is why a single spoonful of porridge filled me with happiness*, he thought while squeezing his chest.

"...I see," Ryuho said. "Yeah, I do want to play together again! And go on adventures! It was super cool when Hisame made everything splodey-spolde! I wanna do that again!"

Angelina smiled. "Let's keep the splodey-splodes small next time, okay?"

"Yeah, we don't wanna get hurt!" Laughing, Ryuho turned towards Hisame. "Get well soon, and we'll do that again!"

"Are you talking about the phreatic explosion?" Hisame asked.

"Yeah, that thing! And start feeding yourself once you're better!"

"Hmm. I might keep being sick for a little while longer then."

Ryuho tried to bare his fangs out of habit. "Hell no! Not fair!"

"I agree," Angelina said with a smile. "We won't be able to play together if you stay sick. Get well soon, okay?"

She held out another spoonful of warm porridge with her glittering right hand. The wolfberries—said to be an elixir of immortality—shone with a red light.

Hisame nodded while grinning from ear to ear. "Okay!" he exclaimed before

opening wide again. The sweet rice melted in his mouth, the tender chicken was pleasantly savory, and the wolfberries popped between his teeth. Altogether, a pleasant warmth spread throughout his body.

Angelina and Ryuho discussed where they would visit next while sitting on Hisame's bed. The depths of Hisame's eyes prickled as if he were staring at a bright light. At long last, he'd been accepted into the friend group. Apart from its healing magic, Angelina's porridge seemed full of love. Soon, Hisame's nose began to run, perhaps because the porridge had warmed him. After squeezing his eyes shut, he sniffled.



FEILONG was spending yet another hectic workday in the Celestial Axe Tower. A number of problems had arisen during his regression into a child. Though Kyril had dealt with many affairs on his behalf, a plethora of issues requiring Feilong's personal judgment had accumulated. During his absence, vassal nations had started scheming for independence, and a great many people had begun targeting the empire. Thus, Feilong had to race around the palace, putting out fires. Yes, Rachiel had quelled a small skirmish, but Feilong still needed to nip the next conflict in the bud.



SNACK time had arrived in the Celestial Axe Tower. Angelina and Ryuho were climbing the stairs with baskets of treats in their hands. Since their return from Yule Castle, Ryuho had maintained a human form. He had neither a tail nor ears.

"Snack time!" Angelina called out as she and Ryuho opened the office door together.

Feilong stood up and spread out his arms with a wide smile. When Angelina raced over to him, he scooped her up, sat in his chair, and placed her on his knees.

"What did you bring today?" Feilong asked, peering into the basket with the expression of a kind father.

Red jelly squares placed on skewers for easy eating filled the basket.

"Hawthorn jelly squares," Angelina replied, handing one of the skewers to Feilong.

However, Feilong opened his mouth wide rather than taking the skewer.

Seriously? Angelina thought with a bemused smile, sticking the skewer into his mouth. *Father's been acting like a spoiled baby ever since he transformed into a child.*

Angelina and Feilong were now as close as father and daughter could be. That made Angelina happy despite any embarrassment. Feilong had risked his life to protect her. Moreover, he regretted the past deeply enough to believe he deserved death. After realizing those truths, Angelina finally forgave her father without reservation.

As the courtiers lined up in front of Feilong's desk, Angelina and Ryuho distributed the snacks. Thus, everyone enjoyed their short break. The strict, unfeeling emperor kept the courtiers quite busy. This was the only time in which they felt at ease.

"By the way, I heard about the collapse of Yule Castle from Yuen," Feilong said while showing a document to Angelina.

"The Yulan citizens were discontented even before the collapse," Tomi added.

Angelina nodded.

"It'll take some time, but I'm thinking about draining the lake and rebuilding Yule," Feilong said. "As a vassal nation, of course. Still, being able to return home will serve as a small recompense for the nomadic Yulans."

"Are you sure?" Angelina asked.

"I must correct the previous emperor's foolish mistakes."

Angelina slumped her shoulders. "But the castle collapsed. The Yulan Secret Arts are gone, too."

In fact, the castle had collapsed *because* she'd decided not to inherit the secret arts.

"Exactly," Feilong said. "With the secret arts gone, we can rebuild Yule as a small, remote village. There won't be any reason to target them anymore."

Likewise, there won't be any need to submerge the lake or release monstrous fish into the water."

Angelina's heart felt somewhat lighter at these words.

"We would also like to name you Queen of Yule, Princess Angelina," Tomi said. "This will provide a foundation for the newly restored nation."

"N-No!" Angelina cried, overcome with surprise and waving her hands. "The Yulan people hate me, remember?"

A chill ran down her spine when she recalled the cold stares she'd received in the Yulan forest.

"While the castle might have collapsed, the bell signaling the birth of a new queen also rang out," Yuen explained. "On top of that, you also formed a new contract with Lord Rachiel. The Yulans who witnessed these events up close will revere you as their queen, Your Highness."

"Pretty convenient for them," Ryuho scoffed.

Tomi chuckled. "The Yulans have suffered a great deal of persecution. If you announced the reconstruction of Yule as the new queen, you would become a beacon of hope for them, Princess Angelina."

Angelina looked up at Feilong, who nodded and smiled at her. When she looked at Kyril, he was smiling as well.

"If becoming queen helps people, I'll do it," Angelina agreed.

By rights, her mother should have become Queen of Yule. Therefore, she wanted to help her mother's barren nation recover. If the Yulan people gathered together again, perhaps they would decipher their lost magic someday. Understanding the workings of sorcery at a deep level could help the nation expand.

"I just want everyone to be happy," Angelina said with a smile.

When her father embraced her, Ryuho bellowed, "That's not fair, Feilong! Break time's over!"

Feilong pressed his face against Angelina's forehead to show off.

"That tickles, Fodder," Angelina said with a laugh.

While Yuen shrugged, Tomi chuckled, his expression exasperated.

"Now then, Father, break time really is over," Kyril chided him, picking up Angelina from his lap.

Feilong seemed reluctant to part with his daughter as he gazed at her. "Can't we have a little more time together?"

Kyril glared at his father lightly. "Didn't you just take a long rest from your duties?"

"S-Sorry," Feilong mumbled, unable to find any other words.

"I'm not looking for an apology."

"...Thank you."

As Kyril smiled in satisfaction, the courtiers bit the insides of their cheeks to suppress their laughter. Seeing the human side of the cruel emperor put everyone at ease.

"Well then, I'll take Lina back to the North Star Sanctuary," Kyril said nonchalantly.

As he left the office with Angelina in his arms, Ryuho followed him, shouting, "Not fair! Not fair!"

Once the lively bunch had left the office, Tomi clapped his hands. "Shall we continue then? Our job is to create an empire where children can live happily."

As Feilong smiled and Yuen nodded, an air of liveliness tinged the office. The light pouring through the windows sparkled like a scale of the Golden Dragon, illuminating Feilong's silver hair.

Chapter 9: Angelina's Coronation

FIVE years had passed since Yule Castle's collapse. The lake water had been drained little by little, and the restoration of Yule had begun. The sight of Yule right after the draining had been heartrending. Only the collapsed castle and dilapidated city remained. Nevertheless, the Yulan citizens who gathered there today wore peaceful expressions. Their country had been stolen, forcing them to become nomads. The joy of returning home outweighed anything else.

Yule Castle had crumbled to dust. The hexagonal prism tower had collapsed, and it was impossible to tell where the queen's room had been. Likewise, the golden tree Rachiel had been bound to had withered. Of course, the platform had been blown away as well. Only the bell remained. Rachiel and his wife—the inaugural Queen of Yule—had forged it together. During the founding of Yule, they'd rung the bell while praying for happiness.

Feilong had urged Angelina to consider repairing the castle as the first step in restoring the nation. He'd considered this her duty as the Queen of Yule. Ultimately, Angelina decided to build a concert hall over the ruins. Though Yulans viewed the castle as a holy site, Rachiel probably wanted to forget about it after his long imprisonment.

And if we rebuild the castle, people might suspect the Yulan Secrets Arts are sealed there, Angelina thought. We can't allow that conflict to brew again.

That said, she'd been reluctant to destroy the bell, as it was a relic of Rachiel's dead wife. While considering a plan to preserve it, she'd finally decided to build a concert hall on the castle ruins. There, she would repurpose the bell as a decoration.



THE opening ceremony of the concert hall had arrived. Yulan citizens gathered to see the unveiling of their country's new symbol. The concert hall was shaped like a mortar bowl with a roof over the stage. While the golden bell

sparkled atop the roof, the audience seats were partially outdoors with a moveable roof.

During springtime in Yule, snow still blanketed the ground, and the chilly air bit into one's skin. Nonetheless, snowdrop flowers had finally begun to sprout from the crevices of the white powder.

Angelina left the greenroom in a Yulan dress. She also wore a collared cape with silver fur to protect against the cold. Feilong had personally hunted a rare, mystical fox to provide his beloved daughter with it. Of course, he'd also enchanted the cape with protective magic. The cruel emperor's love for his daughter grew more terrifying with each passing day.

Recently, Angelina had turned ten years old. After her coming-of-age ceremony, presiding over the opening ceremony would be her first official duty. As the Imperial Princess of Jinlong and Queen of Yule, she would conduct the music at the concert hall—the symbol of Yule's restoration.

Her white, knee-length dress had been woven from silkworm thread and decorated lavishly with delicate lace. Furthermore, the garment had been embroidered with silver thread. To top it all off, crimson rubies modeled after the Tianshi's Protective Seal sparkled on the fabric here and there. Her white, high-laced boots were quite warm as well. Finally, she wore white wings on her back per Rachiel's request. Altogether, she could have been mistaken for a tianshi in this outfit.

"Are you sure this isn't weird?" Angelina asked, her cheeks flushing.

She posed that question to Ryuho, who was waiting in front of the greenroom with Hisame. While Ryuho held the conductor's baton, Hisame held the sheet music. Both boys had decided to join Angelina on stage.

"Whoa!" Ryuho shouted, his cheeks turning red as well. "You look cute! So cute!"

He always called Angelina cute, no matter what she wore. Even so, his straightforward compliment still made her happy.

"I'm serious—you're cute as a button!" Ryuho exclaimed. "It must've hurt when you fell from Heaven 'cause you look like a tianshi!" As Ryuho shouted

excitedly, ears popped out of his head, and a tail sprouted from his lower back. “Huh?! Are you kidding me?! Why did that just happen?!”

Ryuho had maintained his human form for the past five years. He hadn’t transformed into a tiger since declaring his intent to become human in front of Rachiel. Bewildered, he tried to shove his ears back down.

“You’re getting overexcited, Ryuho,” Hisame said with a wry smile.

Still, Angelina’s cute enough that I understand his excitement, he thought.

“But I suppose I can’t blame him,” Hisame continued with rosy cheeks. “You look very beautiful, Angelina.”

“...Thanks, Hisame,” Angelina replied, slightly embarrassed.

Her stomach churned with nerves. Soon, she would have to stand on stage and address everyone as the Queen of Yule. Afterward, she would conduct the concert hall’s opening ceremony. Her hands quivered at the idea of conducting in front of such a large audience for the first time.

“What if I mess up?” she mumbled, her heart racing.

“You’ll be okay,” Ryuho answered, sticking out his hand. “I’m right here with you.”

When Angelina took his hand, Hisame held out his hand from the opposite side. “I’m here too.”

“Yeah!” Angelina exclaimed.

Thus, the three children walked to the stage while holding hands. A great number of traveling performers filled the orchestra seats. A Yulan troupe would perform for the opening ceremony rather than a famous orchestra. Angelina took up position in front of the music stand at the center of the stage. Hisame let go of Angelina’s hand and unfolded the sheet music atop the stand.

The Yulan audience stirred. A strange figure stood on either side of the young, angelic girl. One was a Nanranese prince with tiger ears and a tail. The other was an Andan prince with fangs and a horn growing from his forehead. As the crowd’s murmurings grew louder, Angelina recoiled.

In response, Ryuho took her trembling hand again, his grip warm and strong.

At the same time, Hisame took her other hand softly. His cool, gentle grip helped calm Angelina's nerves. When she lifted her head and looked around the theater seats, she found two suspicious figures lurking behind the rearmost pillars.

"Oh crap," Ryuho swore under his breath. "Should the emperor even be here?"

Feilong and Kyril had come to the concert hall in secret. Noticing Angelina's stare, they scrambled behind the pillars.

Father and Kyril are such worrywarts, Angelina thought. Mixed exasperation and happiness caused her lips to tug into a smile. But yeah, I'll be okay. I'm not alone anymore.

As Angelina took a deep breath, Ryuho squeezed her hand encouragingly. When she looked at his radiant smile, her heart raced. Not from nerves, however. This happened every so often when she looked at Ryuho as of late, causing her face to boil.

"Are you okay?" Hisame asked.

With a jolt, Angelina fixed a smile on her face and took a deep breath.

"Thank you for attending Yule Concert Hall's opening ceremony," she said to the crowd. "I hope you enjoy the music and each other's company!"

Angelina raised her arms while holding Ryuho and Hisame's hands. The three children—who were so different in appearance—smiled while keeping their fingers interlaced. That coaxed a smile from the Yulans as it suggested a peaceful future. One in which diverse people groups joined hands.

Hisame unfolded the sheet music on top of the music stand. At the same time, Ryuho let go of Angelina and presented her with the conductor's baton with both hands. After taking the baton, Angelina exchanged glances with the boys, who disappeared into the wing. Now alone on the stage, Angelina gulped. As the stares from the orchestra nearly crushed her, Ryuho's voice echoed in her head.

"You'll be just fine, Lina!"

Ryuho hadn't been able to use telepathy since becoming fully human. Angelina waved the baton upwards, his voice encouraging her. At that moment, Rachiel appeared in the upper air.

"It's a tianshi!" multiple people cheered in unison.

When Rachiel pointed to Angelina, the audience gasped and turned their attention back to her. With all eyes on her, Angelina waved the baton down, and the orchestra began performing the Yulan National Anthem. The music rang out in perfect harmony. The troupe performed with a diverse range of instruments procured during their travels. Various sounds mingled together, including eastern flutes, western bells, southern drums, and northern organs.

Meanwhile, Rachiel sang in the blue sky, and the Yulan people accompanied him. The entire concert hall joined together in song. As the final note of the choral national anthem began to fade, the golden bell rang out. A loud peal preceded a deep, resonant clang. As that repeated seven times, the Yulan citizens turned their gazes skywards. Angelina looked up as well.

"This tolling marks the queen's coronation..." someone mumbled.

Overcome with emotion, the Yulan people looked up at the golden bell. Tears ran down some of their faces. As Ryuho and Hisame also turned their gazes skyward, Rachiel descended and kissed Angelina on the head. He crowned her with a silver tiara. Three rubies in the center formed the Tianshi's Protective Seal. The blood-red gemstones reflected the sunlight, standing out in clear relief against the blue sky. The crowd fell deathly quiet upon witnessing this solemn occurrence.

Rachiel hugged Angelina from behind with both arms. At the same time, his fluffy, white wings enfolded her in a blissful embrace. "Angelina Xin Lei is the new Queen of Yule!" Rachiel cried. "She has received a crown from Heaven!"

The crowd jolted as if awakening from a dream. "Long live Queen Angelina!" they cheered in unison. "Long live Queen Angelina! Long live Queen Angelina!"

"Sing for us again, Queen Angelina!" someone shouted.

As Angelina gaped, Rachiel winked at her. "The coronation anthem comes next."

Smiling, Angelina lifted her baton again. The Tianshi's Protective Seal glowed warmly on her raised fist. A hush fell over the crowd as everyone awaited her forthcoming words.

"Our next song is the coronation anthem!" she declared, waving her baton down.

Music filled the theater. The magic overflowing from the baton swept up everyone's singing voices and spread them throughout the entire country. Peach-colored light transformed into raindrops and fell from the sky.

"It's a sun shower!" Ryuho shouted, reaching out his hands to catch the rain. Without thinking, he licked his palms. "And it's sweet!"

Hisame licked his hands as well before looking up at the sky raptly. "It's literally nectar from Heaven. It's making me feel kind of euphoric."

The fragrant spring rain melted the snow. Flowers began to bloom, and people laughed with each other. Birds sang, trees rustled in the wind, and light danced all around them. Voices extolling Angelina rang out across the spring sky.

Who would believe I was once a nameless princess? she wondered with a laugh.

She recalled her past lives. Resolving to live during those painful days opened up new paths. Fortuitous meetings had repaired relationships. Bonds formed through forgiveness had given birth to incredible love.

Rachiel hugged Angelina again. Then, he flew skywards, getting drenched in the sweet rain and disappearing into the fluffy clouds. At once, the rain stopped, and the clouds dispersed. The sky was now so bright and sunny as to be mysterious.

Did he go back to his home in Heaven? Angelina mused.

The idea filled her with relief. Nonetheless, she never wanted to forget the gentleness of his white wings.

Chapter 10: Her Name Is Angelina

ONCE again, a golden cloud trailed across the upper air of the Purple Forbidden Palace.

The gray-haired knight squinted as he looked up at the bright sky. “Looks like the Golden Dragon is making another appearance today.”

The brown-haired knight chuckled. “I don’t think anything special is happening today.”

“Well, the Golden Dragon *is* overprotective of Angelina,” the gray-haired knight said with a sigh, oblivious to his own overprotectiveness.

The brown-haired knight nodded. “Who can blame him when she’s so adorable?”

“From what I’ve heard, even Lord Rachiel has been doting on her as of late.”

“And who can blame him when she’s so adorable?”

When the brown-haired knight repeated the same line, the gray-haired knight shrugged. “No arguments there.”

The two knights shared a laugh while looking up at the golden cloud together.



THE Golden Dragon formed a coil in the flower bed of the Big Dipper Garden. Angelina and Ryuho had cultivated this simple flower bed. Snapdragon flowers resembling the Golden Dragon shone with a radiant light, their fragrance dancing in the wind. Meanwhile, the Bai Ze dozed peacefully while zinnia flowers caressed his mane.

Angelina had begun learning magic from Rachiel. No one in Jinlong could give her detailed tutelage as she’d inherited special abilities from the Yulan royal family. Apart from healing, she could also process magic, drawing out and amplifying the abilities of others.

Though Rachiel returned to Heaven briefly, he'd come back to visit Angelina. "I'm here to foster your talent," he'd said.

Angelina and Rachiel were spending yet another day studying magic while leaning against the dragon's coil. That said, Rachiel was humming while weaving a floral wreath. His flapping wings were proof of his good mood. *Teaching me magic is just a pretext for wanting to see me*, Angelina suspected.

The Golden Dragon's chilly scales felt pleasant against their skin. Ryuho lounged in the early summer sunlight, his tiger ears and tail popping out. He could still change between his human and tiger forms.

"Will I become a Flame Tiger even though I decided to be human?" Ryuho asked anxiously.

"You are both a Flame Tiger and a human," the Bai Ze answered.

"But everyone said I would have to choose one or the other when I grew up."

The Bai Ze smiled. "Lack of precedent doesn't mean impossible."

Angelina squeezed Ryuho's tail in her arms. "Isn't that great?" she asked with a smile.

Ryuho grinned bashfully. If pressed, he would have chosen to become human, as that would allow him to be with Angelina. Still, what could be better than having the strengths of both a human and a tiger?

"All right then!" Ryuho shouted, balling his hand into a fist. "I'll work my tail off to use my full tiger strength as a human!"

"I believe in you!" Angelina cheered.

Rachiel placed a floral wreath on her head as she laughed. A moment later, he placed a similar wreath on Ryuho's head.

Ryuho blinked while looking at Angelina. "You look so cute, Lina!"

Angelina blinked back at him in a similar fashion. "You too, Ryuho!"

Ryuho purred, grinning with an air of delight. Angelina's heart fluttered. She'd been feeling a bit peculiar as of late. For some reason, her chest constricted, and her face flushed whenever Ryuho fixed his gaze on her. The young boy had

grown quite a bit. He'd been sparring with Feilong daily to hone his martial prowess—something he already excelled at. That pursuit had sculpted his physique into a robust, masculine form. Moreover, he'd begun to take his studies seriously after feeling like a dead weight in Yule Castle.

As Ryuho continued to grow into a gallant young man, Angelina struggled to process her feelings. Until now, she'd always regarded him as an adorable little cat. Lately, however, he'd begun to look more mature. In short, he was incredibly dashing.

"What are you thinking about, Lina?" Ryuho asked, peering at her from a short distance away.

Jolting, Angelina whipped her head to the side.

Ryuho's face fell, his expression hurt. "You've been doing that a lot lately," he said, his ears drooping. "Do you hate me now?"

"No..." Angelina mumbled, still averting her gaze. "Not at all."

Rachiel grinned at the children's adorable exchange. Unable to handle the cloying atmosphere, the Bai Ze stood up, kicked off from the flower bed, and returned to Mt. Jinlong.

Ryuho grabbed Angelina's face with both hands and bumped their foreheads together. "Then look at me if you don't hate me!"

Angelina squeezed her eyes shut, her cheeks boiling.

"Why are you closing your eyes?" Ryuho asked, his voice quivering with unease.

Slowly, Angelina opened her eyes to peer back at him. "W-Well..."

"Yeah?"

"My chest kind of hurts..."

Puzzled, Ryuho rubbed his nose against Angelina's. "How come?" he asked with a nonchalant grin. "We're always together, right?"

"Yeah, we are," Angelina mumbled in response. "I don't understand this either..."

Her chest ached as her heart raced. Why couldn't she understand her feelings?

"You don't hate me, right?" Ryuho asked, his tone still anxious.

"No, I love you," Angelina replied.

In the past, she'd regretted not telling her loved ones that. If possible, she would never make that mistake again.

"Then everything's fine!" Ryuho exclaimed, smiling as he rubbed his nose against hers again. With that, he threw himself down against the Golden Dragon's coil. The scent of summer wafted from the grass, which was slightly damp and warm, unlike the dragon's scales.

"You're not mad?" Angelina asked timidly.

"Why would I be mad?" Ryuho answered.

"And you're not in any pain?"

Angelina couldn't decipher why only her chest ached.

"Not at all," Ryuho said with a smile, his ears perking up. His wagging tail slapped against the dandelions, causing their fuzz to float into the air. "I'm happy, having fun, and you're cute. I'd hate to be a nuisance 'cause I just want you to be happy too!"

It's a little vexing that I'm the only one in pain, Angelina thought.

She placed her hands on his shoulders and peered into his face. At that moment, his cheeks turned bright red, and his mouth hung open.

Wait, does Ryuho feel the same as me?!

As happiness and delight overcame Angelina, she bumped her nose against Ryuho's. She rolled over beside him to flee from his startled expression. Blood pounded in her ears, and the muggy odor of summer grass tickled her nostrils. A smile danced upon her lips despite the ache in her chest.

"Your heart is racing, Lina," Ryuho mumbled, perplexed. "Is this what you were talking about?"

Angelina nodded.

"Then I feel the same way!" Ryuho exclaimed, rolling over to face her.

Angelina met his gaze. "Really?"

"Yep, sure do."

Both children blinked while gazing at each other, their cheeks flushing.

I love you.

That thought crossed both their minds.

A moment later, they stood up. Both felt embarrassed upon remembering the Golden Dragon's presence.

"Angelina!" Hisame called out.

The Andan prince could now speak loudly, unlike when he and Angelina first met. He, too, had grown into a gallant young man, his beautiful horn extending from his forehead. Appearances aside, he held a basket filled with glass bottles of various colors. "Let's eat something cold," he said, taking out three bottles and making snow fall inside them. They could make shaved ice by pouring fruit syrup inside the colorful bottles.

"I want that one," Ryuho said, pointing to the peach syrup. "It's the same color as Lina's hair!"

While Hisame chose blueberry syrup, Angelina struggled to decide. Peach and blueberry both seemed appetizing, but the strawberry syrup reminded her of Ryuho's hair.

"Which one should I pick?" Angelina asked.

Rachiel scattered snapdragon petals over the snow. "Just pour every syrup over your ice!"

"Okay!" Angelina responded with an emphatic nod, a smile splitting across her face.

"Then I'll do that too!" Ryuho shouted.

"Me too," Hisame agreed.

The Golden Dragon stirred languidly. "Shaved ice does sound quite appetizing, what with today being so hot."

"Oh yeah," Angelina said, cupping her hands into a bowl. "Could you give me some more snow, Hisame?"

Hisame conjured snow in Angelina's palms, and Ryuho poured a generous amount of syrup on top of it. After Rachiel placed a flower atop the shaved ice, Angelina circled around to the Golden Dragon's snout, holding it out to him with both hands. "Here you go!"

The dragon licked the shaved ice with his long tongue while regarding Angelina fondly. "Yes, quite delicious indeed," he said with a satisfied laugh.

"You have some, too, Mister Rachiel!" Angelina exclaimed, holding her cupped palms out to him.

Rachiel scooped up a mouthful, stuffed his cheeks, and smiled, satisfied. Without saying anything, he patted Angelina's head and ruffled Hisame's hair.

"Your shaved ice is so good, Hisame!" Ryuho shouted, his tail bouncing up and down. "It's cool and relaxing!"

Angelina took a bite of the shaved ice as well. It immediately melted like an illusion, as it was so soft and fine. Just as Ryuho had said, it provided her with a sense of tranquility and refreshment.

"Yeah, it's really tasty!" Angelina agreed. "And I'm bursting with energy!"

Smiling bashfully, Hisame took his first bite without saying anything. Light pink butterflies danced in the spring wind underneath the blue sky. The snapdragon flowers appeared to be floating on water as they swayed back and forth. All the while, Rachiel's golden hair fluttered in the breeze, the gemstones on his forehead gleaming.

"Feilong should arrive soon," the Golden Dragon said, letting forth a heavy yawn as he stretched. "That annoying whelp."

"Will Kyril be with him?" Rachiel asked, looking towards the North Star Sanctuary expectantly. "Feilong might be awful, but Kyril is too adorable."

Father makes nothing but enemies, Angelina thought with a giggle. But what else is new?

A chill drifted towards them from the distance, signaling the arrival of the

cold-blooded emperor. As Ryuho wrapped Angelina in a soft embrace, his expression looked like a soldier spoiling for a fight.

Angelina stiffened in surprise, a blush creeping up her cheeks. “Ryuho?”

Hisame let out a sigh of exhaustion.

“Let go of her, Ryuho!” Feilong roared, looking like a fierce deity as he zoomed towards them.

Meanwhile, Kyril smiled stiffly at his father’s behavior.

“Not gonna happen!” Ryuho shouted back, rubbing his cheek against Angelina’s to provoke Feilong. “I love Lina!”

“Shut your trap,” Feilong growled, pulling Angelina away from Ryuho and picking her up. “I love her with all my heart!”

Kyril and Rachiel sighed in exasperation as they watched the emperor quarrel with a child.

The Golden Dragon chuckled. “No wonder the Bai Ze didn’t recognize Feilong as a statesman.”

“How old do you think I am, Father?” Angelina asked with an awkward smile.

Feilong looked down at his daughter with a none-too-confident expression. “Not too old to be held by me, right...?”

The sunlight had warmed his smooth, silver hair. Likewise, his sweat-dappled neck proved how fast he’d raced over here.

Emotion swelled within Angelina’s chest. “You can hold me for a little while longer,” she said while hugging her father, who needed reassurance.

She recalled all the days of her life up until now. In her first life, she’d died without knowing love. In her second life, she’d fled the Big Dipper Garden and learned of love. In her third life, she’d fallen in love with a man, but her feelings had been unrequited. In her fourth and current life, abundant love had enveloped her. Though she’d once given up on familial love, she now knew its joy.

I was able to break the cycle of sadness and hatred because I wasn’t alone,

she realized. *Because I received the power of love from Ryuho, Kyril, Marfa, and many others. That's why I was able to forgive my past and Father.*

The protective seal on Angelina's palm began to glow, soothing the scars on Feilong's ear. The wounds he'd inflicted on himself would never disappear completely. Even so, Angelina hoped they would fade, if only a little.

"That's enough!" Ryuho shouted at Feilong's feet. "Put her down!"

Feilong snorted. "That's not for you to decide."

"It's my turn next, right?" Kyril asked, spreading out his arms in Angelina's direction.

Nodding emphatically, Angelina reached out to him. "Gimme a hug, Big Brother!"

Feilong handed her over reluctantly. When Rachiel saw the two Yulan siblings together, the tianshi hugged Kyril from behind.

"Lord Rachiel?!" Kyril cried out, whipping around.

However, Rachiel beat his wings and fled into the sky. He began to sing. The Yulan lullaby spread across the Big Dipper Garden, accompanied by the sound of wind.

My children are more precious to me than any gemstone, be it silver, gold, or pearls.

Feilong looked up at the sky wistfully, reminiscing about Phaenna. He followed the trajectory of a single white feather as it floated down towards him. The gentle and elegant way it danced in the air reminded him of Phaenna's life. People and circumstances had always buffeted her about like a feather flapping in the wind.

After jumping up and catching the feather, Ryuho held it out to Feilong. "Here ya go."

Feilong stared at the young boy, taken aback.

Ryuho cocked his head. "You wanted this, right?"

"Was I giving that impression?" Feilong asked, furrowing his brow.

Ryuho pursed his lips. “Then I’ll take it if you don’t need it!”

“No, I want it,” Feilong answered, holding out his hand to the boy.

Grinning, Ryuho slapped Feilong’s palm. Thus, the white feather rested upon his reddened skin.

“Then you should’ve said so from the start,” Ryuho complained.

Angelina couldn’t help but laugh at his peevish tone. “What are you supposed to say, Father?”

“...Thank you,” Feilong replied against his will.

Ryuho laughed, rubbing his pointer finger under his nose. “You’re oh-so-very welcome, Emperor Feilong.”

The emperor felt as though the feather was tickling his heart as well as his palm.

“All right, Kyril, your turn’s up now too!” Ryuho shouted, pestering him to put Angelina down.

Kyril let go of his little sister reluctantly. Afterward, Ryuho took her hand, and the two dashed off together.

“Lina!”

“Lina!”

“Angelina!”

As multiple voices called her name, she turned around and hopped into the air, grinning from ear to ear. “I’m so glad I’m Angelina!”

No one called her *That* anymore, for her name was Angelina Xin Lei. Her first name meant tianshi, and she’d been given the surname of the Jinlongian royal family.

Who would believe I was once called the nameless princess?

As that thought crossed her mind, a light pink butterfly alighted on her floral wreath.

“Whoa, cute!” Ryuho exclaimed with a laugh. “There’s a butterfly on your

crown!"

That drew a laugh from Angelina. The drifting clouds heralded summer's arrival. Angelina lifted her hand and looked up at the sky. As sunlight filtered through the protective seal on her palm, the blood pumping through her veins was the same crimson as Ryuho's eyes.

Thank you, Mother, Angelina thought, squeezing her hand into a fist. Thank you for giving birth to me and naming me Angelina. I'm so glad to have met everyone. I no longer wish I were never born.

The light pink butterfly flew away from Angelina's wreath, alighting on the tattered cloth fastened to Feilong's sword. Then, it fluttered into the sky as if dancing with joy. Surely, it was delivering Angelina's unspoken words to Heaven.

Side Story: Angelina's Happy Evening

ANGELINA struggled to choose from a line of dresses in her wardrobe room in the North Star Sanctuary. Marfa stood by her side.

"What should I do?" Angelina asked. "I have no idea what to wear."

She would be visiting the outer enclosure of the Purple Forbidden Palace with Ryuho today. Feilong had recently abdicated the throne, allowing Kyril to become emperor. Strangely, it was the same year as Feilong's downfall in Angelina's first life. This time, however, he'd abdicated peacefully, not been assassinated. Thus, Jinlong's peaceful days continued without death.

While Angelina was seventeen, Ryuho was twenty. After passing the palace knight's exam at sixteen, Ryuho was allowed to carry a sword. As a result, he'd been promoted from her playmate to her personal knight.

Festivals were still taking place in the palace and the outer enclosure, even though the ascension ceremony had ended a few days ago. After participating in the ceremony, Angelina had some free time.

"I'll stand out too much in this," Angelina said. "It's too extravagant for the outer enclosure."

"Yes, I agree," Marfa replied.

"Should I wear something that's easy to move around in?"

"In that case, why don't we start with the shoes?"

In a flash, the palace ladies lined up a row of shoes that were easy to walk in. Angelina owned so many clothes and jewels that she would never be able to wear them all. These gifts primarily came from Feilong and Kyril. That said, she'd also received gifts from nearby royalty and nobility, Heavenly Sovereign daoshi, and even Rachiel.

As Angelina struggled to choose, Marfa pointed to a pair of shoes. "What do you think of these, Princess?"

The elegant shoes had short heels. Black embroidery was on the black silk. Furthermore, black pearls decorated the insteps. Though the shoes were delicate and extravagant upon close inspection, they wouldn't appear too expensive while walking, thanks to their uniform color.

Angelina nodded. "Yeah, I'll go with these!" Even so, she still needed to decide what clothes to wear next. "Hmm, what should I do? This is too flashy, right? But this is too plain, don't you think? Maybe I should go with something cute. Or maybe mature is better?"

Angelina seldom took this long to decide on an outfit. She usually left this task to the palace ladies, after all.

"You're having a difficult time deciding today," Marfa said gently. "Is something wrong, Princess?"

After a moment's hesitation, Angelina responded to Marfa in a whisper. "Well, you see, Ryuho said my dress for the ceremony was cute."

The eavesdropping palace ladies couldn't help but smile.

"How wonderful," Marfa said, her heart filling with warmth.

"But don't you think he'll be disappointed by my regular, going-out clothes?"

"Not at all," Marfa answered while suppressing a smile.

Ryuho had complimented Angelina because *she* was cute, not her dress. However, it would be uncouth for anyone other than Ryuho to tell her that.

"I just want Ryuho to like me," Angelina mumbled, clearly uneasy.

Ryuho had grown into a tall and dashing man. He now had broad shoulders and a solid chest. Angelina sometimes caught glimpses of his sun-kissed skin through the gaps in his vest. His Nanranese clothes exuded a certain sensuality, accentuating his masculinity. Moreover, he was powerful enough to contend with Yuen—a man often hailed as Jinlong's god of war. His strength even commanded the respect of Emperor Kyril.

On top of being a Nanranese prince, he also shared a close bond with Prince Hisame of Anda. In short, he had an animalistic physique and a guileless personality. His crimson and gold eyes teemed with passion. At the same time,

his expressive smile made him popular with everyone, regardless of age or gender. People always gathered around Ryuho during small dinner parties. Much to Angelina's dismay, countless women would cast flirtatious glances his way, even when they were walking together.

Ryuho still says he loves me, but it feels like a habit at this point, Angelina thought. His proposal in Yule Castle was so long ago. He's probably forgotten all about it.

At some point, Ryuho had grown distant from Angelina. As children, they'd curled up next to each other like kittens and slept. Now, they would hold hands at the most, and Angelina was always the one to initiate.

Whenever Angelina saw Ryuho's back, she wanted to throw her arms around him and run her fingers through his hair. Yet each time she drew too close to him, he laughed and pulled away. She didn't know why he did that or what she should do.

Seeing Angelina's shoulders slump, Marfa wrapped her in a gentle embrace. "Well then, let's pick an outfit that will make Prince Ryuho happy."

"...Thank you, Marfa."

The palace ladies rallied to attend to Angelina. They massaged her muscles, performed a skin care routine, and arranged her hair in a lovely style. Despite choosing an outfit suitable for a casual stroll through town, they imbued it with a slightly more mature ambiance than usual. Her one-piece dress was a chic black, matching her shoes. It was less voluminous than usual in accordance with the growing trends of the outer enclosure. Finally, the decorative buttons and hemming were a demure aqua hue.

Angelina's eyes widened as she examined herself in the mirror. The contours of her body were far more pronounced than she'd anticipated, causing a blush to creep up her cheeks. She looked more sensual than usual, thanks to the thorough efforts of the palace ladies.

"Um, this is a wonderful outfit, but does it look good on me...?" Angelina asked.

"Why, of course!" Marfa exclaimed.

The palace ladies nodded along with her.

“Are you finished getting ready, Lina?” a voice called from the other side of the door.

Angelina’s heart raced when she heard Ryuho’s voice. She couldn’t answer. Her chest felt like it might explode.

“You still in there, Lina?” Ryuho called out again.

“That’s your cue, Princess,” Marfa said.

The idea of Ryuho seeing her in such a different outfit than usual caused Angelina’s cheeks to burn even redder. “Give me a minute, Marfa. My heart is about to burst...”

“She’s coming now,” Marfa answered on Angelina’s behalf.

“Marfaaa...” Angelina whined, seeking the woman’s help.

Marfa merely grinned in response, giving Angelina’s back a light shove. “Here we go, Princess.”

“I-I just need a minute, okay?”

Marfa and the palace ladies joined forces to push the squirming Angelina out the door.

“P-Please, Marfa!” Angelina exclaimed.

Marfa closed the wardrobe door behind them, ignoring Angelina’s pleas for help.

“Seriously?” Angelina groaned, pressing her forehead against the closed door. “Let me back in.”

“Lina...”

Angelina turned around timidly upon hearing Ryuho’s husky voice. His fiery eyes sparkled as he gazed at her. Furthermore, his tiger ears—which Angelina hadn’t seen for quite some time—popped straight out of his hair.

“Ryuho...”

When she said his name bashfully, he spread out his arms with a wide grin,

ears twitching giddily.

He's going to hug me!

Realizing that, an overjoyed Angelina tried to dive into his chest. At that moment, Ryuho jolted and looked away, his arms falling to either side of him.

I should've expected that, Angelina thought, hanging her head from shock. Ryuho doesn't love me anymore.

As Angelina slumped her shoulders, Ryuho cleared his throat. "Um..." he mumbled in a barely audible voice. "You look incredibly cute, Lina."

When Angelina had worn formal attire during the ascension ceremony, Ryuho had kept shouting about how cute she looked. In fact, Angelina had needed to shush him. Today, however, he'd reacted completely differently, causing her heart to sink.

He probably doesn't like these sorts of clothes, she thought, still hanging her head.

"This outfit is pretty weird, isn't it?" she asked in a feeble voice. "If you don't like it, I can change into my regular clothes..."

"No!" Ryuho shouted, shaking his head and hands at the same time. "That's not what I meant!"

Angelina eyed him timidly. His face was bright red, and his breathing was heavy. When their eyes locked, Ryuho averted his gaze, causing her heart to sink again.

"But..." Angelina trailed off.

"That's not what I meant," Ryuho insisted, blood pounding in his ears. He gripped his chest in an attempt to calm his racing heart. "What I meant to say is... Um, you look beautiful. Incredibly beautiful and, um, cute..."

Angelina peered upwards.

"You usually dress up for ceremonies," Ryuho continued, hiding his face in his hands. "Those clothes are for everyone to see, but you chose that outfit just for me, right? Because we're going on a date?"

When he stated it outright, Angelina hung her head in embarrassment. She felt like running away.

“...Am I wrong?” Ryuho pressed, sounding none-too-confident.

Angelina shook her head fervently.

“Like I said, you look really beautiful,” Ryuho went on. “And different from usual. Seeing you look so mature made my heart race, and I had no idea what to do with myself.”

Angelina lifted her head. Ryuho was still looking at her with flushed cheeks.

“...You don’t hate this outfit?” she asked.

“No way! You’re super cute, and I’m super happy! I don’t even want other guys to see you!”

Angelina cocked her head, causing Ryuho’s heart to flutter. “I’m going to lose my self-control if you go around looking that cute,” he grumbled, hiding his mouth to obfuscate the words.

“What was that?” Angelina asked. “I couldn’t hear you.”

Ryuho pursed his lips. “Any guy who sees you in that outfit will fall even harder for you. If Hisame caught so much as a glimpse of you, he’d kidnap you back to Anda. Just thinking about it makes me want to hide you.”

Angelina burst out laughing. Hisame had graduated from the Advancing Wisdom Academy years ago. Afterward, he’d distinguished himself as a Prince of Anda. He was the king’s right-hand man, and people referred to him as Anda’s wise sage. He’d even become famous throughout Jinlong. During the recent ascension ceremony, he’d participated as the King of Anda’s representative.

“I don’t think you need to worry about any men kidnapping me,” Angelina said.

Ryuho continued pursing his lips. “Let me be the judge of that!”

No matter how mature Ryuho had become, he was still himself. Angelina found solace in his childish manner of speaking.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Angelina said with a laugh. “After all, you’ll always be by my side, right?”

Ryuho shrank back. He couldn’t muster a counterattack in response to Angelina’s dazzling smile and reassuring words.

“All right!” Angelina exclaimed, holding out her hand. “Ready to head out?”

Gah, she doesn’t play fair, Ryuho grumbled inwardly, taking her hand politely. She always managed to get the best of him.



ANGELINA and Ryuho arrived at the entrance of the Blue Ocean Bar. Appetizing scents wafted from inside the restaurant. The bustling noise of the lunchtime crowd echoed all the way outside. After exchanging glances with Angelina, Ryuho opened the door and stepped inside.

“Hello!” both of them raised a greeting in unison.

“Welcome!” an energetic voice called back.

During a previous visit some years ago, a young male apprentice had been arguing with a girl. Now, the man was the proprietor. Similarly, the girl—now a woman—was his wife and proprietress. As Angelina surveyed the lively interior of the bar, a small girl of about three years old darted among the customers. Though she seemed intent on assisting, her actions appeared somewhat disruptive. Nevertheless, the surrounding adults watched over her with indulgent smiles.

“Goodness!” the proprietress called out to Angelina. “It’s been too long, Your Highness!”

“Congratulations on the child,” Angelina replied, directing her gaze towards the young girl.

The proprietress beckoned to the young girl. “Come over here for a moment, Ming Ming.”

“Okay!” Ming Ming cried, dashing over to the proprietress’s side.

Angelina stooped down to meet Ming Ming’s eyes.

“This is my daughter Ming Ming, Your Highness,” the proprietress said. “Ming Ming, this is Princess Angelina. Can you introduce yourself?”

“Ming Ming is me!” the girl exclaimed with a bow.

Warmth spread through Angelina’s chest at the sight of the young girl. After all, she’d transcended time to reunite with the person who’d changed her life during her first loop. Tears welled in her eyes at that thought.

“What’s wrong, Missy?” Ming Ming asked, cocking her head as she looked at Angelina’s watery eyes. “Are you hurt?”

Angelina shook her head. She couldn’t answer, as she feared speaking would cause her to sob.

“Pain, pain, go away!” Ming Ming recited, patting Angelina’s light pink hair with her small hand. “Or Feilong will get you today!”

As Ryuho burst out laughing, Angelina gasped. Ming Ming had recited that charm on the first day they’d met. *We’ve finally reunited*, Angelina realized, a flood of emotions washing over her.

“Ming Ming!” the proprietress yelped, scrambling to chastise her daughter. “Don’t say that!”

Feilong was still the former Emperor of Jinlong despite his abdication. More importantly, he was Angelina’s father. The proprietress expected to be charged with disrespect against the royal family. Thus, she lowered her head, pushing her daughter’s head into a deep bow as well.

“Please forgive us, Your Highness!” the proprietress cried.

“Did I do something wrong?” a flustered Ming Ming asked, looking between her mother and Angelina. “Did I make an oopsie?”

Angelina smiled to reassure the girl. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You’re a good girl, Ming Ming, and my pain is gone thanks to you.”

Ming Ming smiled, looking relieved. “That’s great!”

“I’m truly sorry, Your Highness,” the proprietress apologized again, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Please don't worry about it," Angelina replied. "Your daughter is adorable."

That prompted nods of agreement from the customers. Ming Ming had already become the idol of the Blue Ocean Bar.

As Angelina looked around the tavern to savor its nostalgic atmosphere, Ryuho took her hand. "Let's sit over here, Lina. I'm starving!"

Angelina and Ryuho sat down next to each other at an empty table.

"For starters, I'll have whatever they can whip up the fastest!" Ryuho exclaimed. "Then I'll have lamian and hujiao bing! What about you, Lina?"

Angelina pondered for a moment before waving to Ming Ming. The young girl raced over to the table, delighted to have been called upon. She regarded Angelina with upturned eyes while placing her hands on the table. Angelina's heart fluttered at the adorable behavior.

"What do you recommend today, Ming Ming?" she asked.



“Have some char siu!” Ming Ming exclaimed.

Ryuho frowned. “Char siu, huh? You can put that in lamian, right?”

“But char siu is super tasty by itself!” Ming Ming punched the air and winked. “Adorable pester BEAM!”

Angelina’s heart skipped a beat. She hadn’t seen Ming Ming’s kittenish BEAMS in some time. They still packed a punch.

“I-In that case, I’ll have the char siu,” Angelina responded, gripping her chest as it ached from cuteness overload.

Ryuho regarded her with a puzzled expression. “What’s wrong, Lina?”

“Ming Ming’s adorable pester BEAM was just too cute. I couldn’t refuse the char siu after getting hit by it. Did it not have the same effect on you?”

Ryuho furrowed his brow. “Guess not. Maybe I’m just used to that sort of thing since I’ve known you all these years. You’ve always been the cutest!”

He spoke these words with an air of nonchalance as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The other customers wolf-whistled and jeered them good-naturedly. Angelina buried her face in her hands, flushing crimson to the tips of her ears.

“You’re too much, Ryuho,” she mumbled. “Putting me aside, Ming Ming’s still so cute!”

Ryuho smiled. *Yeah, Lina’s definitely the cutest*, he thought.

“You sure like kids, huh?” he asked.

“...Yeah, I love them,” Angelina replied, lifting her gaze to watch Ming Ming. The way she marched around the tables evoked a protective instinct in Angelina.

Her profile as she watched over Ming Ming captivated Ryuho. Never before had he seen her wear such a serene smile. Warmth blossomed deep within his chest as he observed her tender, motherly expression.

It might be nice, huh? he thought. *Holding a child’s hand with Lina.*

Simply imagining it brought a smile to Ryuho’s lips.

"Which would you prefer, Lina?" he asked. "A boy or a girl?"

"Huh?" she responded, tilting her head. "What are you talking about?"

Ryuho cocked his head in contemplation as well. "I think both are cute! Having one of each wouldn't be bad!"

Here, Ryuho nodded to himself, satisfied, grinning broadly.

"Huh?" Angelina asked again. "What are you talking about, Ryuho?"

"Your kids would definitely be cute, after all," he said matter-of-factly while reclining in his chair. "No doubt about it!"

Angelina couldn't keep up with the sudden shift in the conversation. Meanwhile, the other customers watched their exchange with amused grins.

"What in the world are you talking about, Ryuho?" Angelina asked, perplexed.

Seeing her expression, realization dawned on Ryuho. He'd forgotten to mention the most important part. Yet, as he glanced around, he noticed how much attention they were attracting. As such, he brought his lips close to Angelina's ear to avoid being heard.

"I'm talking about our kids," he whispered.

Startled, Angelina clapped her hands over her ears. "Eep! R-Ryuho?!"

Ryuho donned a sly grin as if he'd just pulled off an elaborate prank. He fixed his gaze on Angelina, his crimson eyes twinkling with a predatory gleam. His masculine allure rendered her speechless.

"Right?" he asked, still grinning. "Our kids would be cute!"

Tears formed in Angelina's azure eyes as emotion swelled in her chest. *Ryuho is imagining a future with me as if it's a given*, she thought. Her heart trembled with joy. His words melted the anxieties that had frozen in the corner of her mind, causing them to spill from her eyes as tears.

"Huh?!" a panicked Ryuho shouted, his tiger ears shooting out and drooping in concern. "Hold on, Lina! What's wrong? Did I say something weird?!"

Ming Ming dashed over to their table and bopped Ryuho on the nose. "Hey there, Mishter! Don't make Missy cry!"

Angelina shook her head. “No, no, he didn’t make me cry!”

Ming Ming placed her hands on Angelina’s knees and looked up at her with concern. “Really? Does your tummy hurt then?”

“No, I’m just really happy,” Angelina replied, wiping her eyes.

Ming Ming laughed in relief. “Then why aren’t you smiling?” she asked, pulling up the corners of her mouth with her pointer fingers. “Gotta smile when you’re happy!”

Angelina nodded and smiled at Ryuho. “Thank you. I love you, and I’m so happy!”

Ryuho chuckled bashfully. “Yeah, I love you too!”

The tavern broke out in cheers and applause.

“Hey, Missus!” one of the men called out to the proprietress. “Send both these youngins a shou tao! Our treat!”

“And two jasmine teas on me!” someone else added.

“Oh no!” Angelina cried. “That’s not necessary!”

The customers all smiled to placate her. “This is repayment for all the happiness you’ve shared with us,” one of them said.

“But...”

Ming Ming pulled on Angelina’s skirt. “Gotta say shanks, Missy. Smile and say shanks, ‘kay?”

Angelina couldn’t help but smile at her urging. “Thank you so much, everyone.”

“Yeah, thanks!” Ryuho added before grinning at Angelina. “This is a pretty nice restaurant.”

Angelina nodded. “It really is. The people here are all wonderful.”

Angelina and Ryuho clinked their glasses of jasmine tea together.

“Let’s order more, Lina!” Ryuho exclaimed.

“Yeah! I want to eat some fried rice!”

Thus, they ordered plenty more food and ate until their stomachs were full to bursting. After leaving the Blue Ocean Bar, they enjoyed the festival in the outer enclosure.



THE first star twinkled in the lavender sky. After thoroughly enjoying the festivities of the outer enclosure, Angelina and Ryuho returned to the palace gates. From there, they returned to the North Star Sanctuary by palanquin. As the palanquin swayed gently, the noise of the festival echoed through the bamboo blinds. Yulan music, accompanied by Andan instruments, filled the air.

The rocking of the palanquin lulled Angelina to sleep. At the same time, Ryuho reminisced about his childhood. Many years ago, he and Angelina had fallen asleep on the backs of two knights while returning home from the Blue Ocean Bar. He wistfully smiled while recalling it.

Angelina leaned against Ryuho's shoulder as she dozed. When her light pink hair tickled his nose, his heart skipped a beat, and he bit his lip. All the while, Angelina's scent filled the narrow confines of the palanquin. Ryuho's heart hammered in his chest, its insistence almost deafening. A shiver ran down his spine, and he gulped, fearing that his racing heart might wake Angelina.

My heart will never slow down if I keep looking at her, he thought.

With this in mind, he squeezed his eyelids shut to avoid looking at her. However, that merely caused her presence to smother him even more. As Angelina's scent tickled his nostrils, her tranquil breath filled his ears. Spots where their bodies touched grew warm, seeming liable to melt away.

How can she sleep so peacefully? Ryuho complained inwardly. Show me a little empathy, why don'tcha?

With his eyes still shut, Ryuho's thoughts drifted back to their childhood. Back then, they'd tumbled and frolicked together like kittens. One day, however, Ryuho had almost devoured Angelina. After getting overexcited, he'd pinned her down with both hands, and the urge to taste her cherry lips had overcome him. As his teeth had come close to sinking in, Angelina had called his name, startling him back to his senses. Her clear, azure eyes had regarded him curiously.

Sometime later, Ryuho had learned the nature of those feelings. As a result, he'd been cautious not to touch her without careful consideration. Though he longed to hold her even now, doing so would cause him to lose restraint. Despite his best intentions, Angelina leaned against him with a serene expression, unaware of his internal struggle.

Does she even see me as a man? Ryuho wondered when he looked at her face. Will I always be the Flame Tiger cub to her?

Angelina and Ryuho had professed their love to each other since childhood. They'd even promised to marry each other in a roundabout way. Still, those had been the words and actions of very young children. Angelina's declarations of love were too straightforward. Ryuho worried that her feelings differed from his. He also feared that he would hurt her by touching her as he desired. Nevertheless, seeing her cry in the Blue Ocean Bar had given him a slight sense of relief.

If Lina wants the same future as me...

Ryuho lifted his eyelids, having made up his mind. He embraced Angelina ever so gently. Light pink hair fell around her petite, slender shoulders. Her soft cheeks reminded him of peaches that would bruise if touched. At long last, he tapped his forehead against hers. When she stirred awake, her already half-lidded eyes narrowed raptly upon seeing him. Ryuho nuzzled his nose against hers as if some invisible force was drawing him to her. Immediately, he tried to pull his face back, thinking he might have gone too far. To his surprise, Angelina responded with a light laugh, nuzzling him back.

Nostalgia swelled in Ryuho's chest. He felt as though they were children again. Just like always, she returned just as much love as he gave.

“Lina,” Ryuho said in a husky voice.

“What is it?” Angelina asked in a similarly hoarse voice.

“I can’t hold myself back any longer. Marry me, Lina.”

Angelina’s eyes widened. As her lips blossomed into a smile, tears fell like morning dew from the outer corners of her eyes.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s get married, Ryuho.”

Ryuho licked away Angelina's tears. His tongue was no longer rough like a Flame Tiger's.

"That tickles," Angelina said with a giggle.

Ryuho brought his face close to hers, his expression serious. "...May I kiss you?"

Startled, Angelina inhaled sharply. Ryuho stared down at her, his feline eyes burning crimson in the dim palanquin. He held one hand against the wall of the vehicle, trapping her in place. Nodding, Angelina closed her eyes without another word. There was no need to run from this tiger, who was so like fire.

At that moment, a sound reminiscent of thunder boomed outside. As the palanquin swayed, the two lovers hastily pulled apart. Both feared that Feilong was watching them from somewhere, as Angelina's father was a master of lightning magic.

"Fireworks are being set off," a servant called from outside the palanquin.

Angelina and Ryuho shared a quiet laugh, relief washing over them. After the servants lowered the palanquin, Ryuho lifted the bamboo blinds. Grand fireworks exploded over the North Star Sanctuary, golden light raining back down.

"Wow!" Angelina cried. "How beautiful!"

Fireworks were continually launched into the sky, one boom echoing after another. The light illuminated Angelina and then disappeared, casting her into darkness. This cycle repeated time and time again.

"...Yeah, it is beautiful," Ryuho said. "But there's nothing more beautiful than you, Lina."

The night of festivities steadily grew later and later. Finally, a fireworks display resembling a massive flower painted the starry sky, signaling the beginning of a new era.



Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

By Kosuzu Kobato Illust. Meij

When Haruka's life collides with Takumi's, she suddenly starts seeing ayakashi! But it's not scary because they look like cute stoats to her, much to Takumi's dismay because all he sees is her fawning over goblins!



How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love

By BlueBlue Illust. Meiji Anno

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How I Became King by Eating Monsters

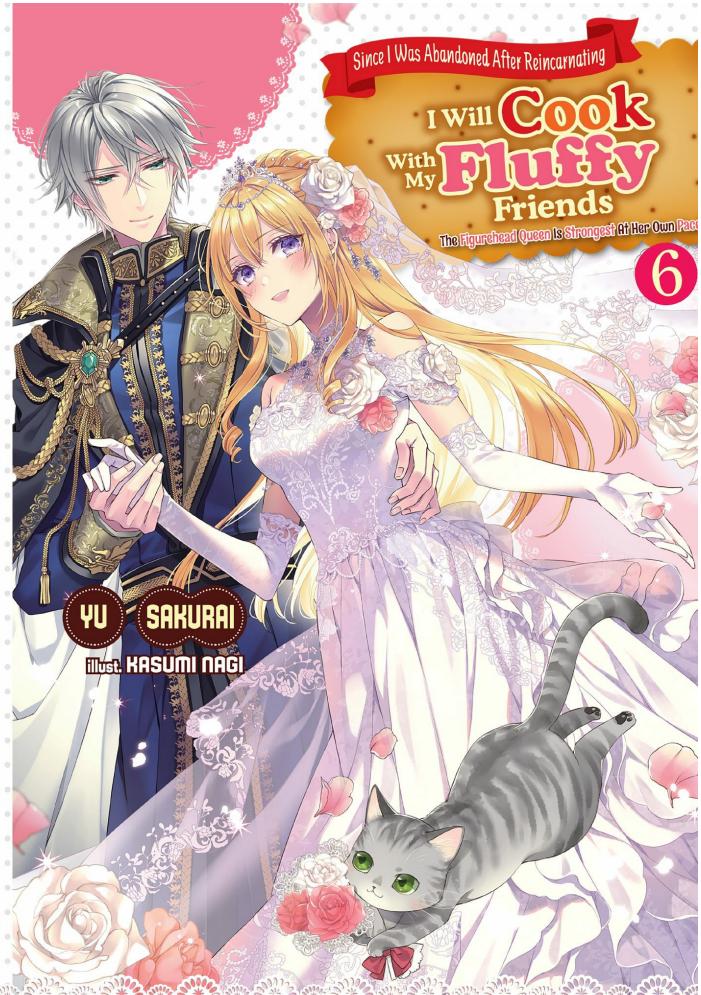
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