

## Saraynea

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Dear Reader,

Return to the FrostPeak Mountains Territory Sample

#### Part 1

Every muscle in the young red panda's body felt sore, her heart beat so hard that she thought it might burst from her chest and she struggled to gasp for air as she ran from the mysterious team that chased her. There were moments when she would lose them for enough time to catch some of her breath, but it was never long before they found her hiding behind a tree or in some bushes and the terrible chase would continue. As they continued uphill, the muscles in her legs ached and gave out on her, but she forced herself to continue. She could tell that her chasers were growing tired as well, but there were five of them and only one of her. They were able to split up and strategize, but all she could do was keep running. Both the hunters and their prey stumbled often as they continued to climb. The red-fur fell to her paws and knees once again, but this time she could not find the strength to pick herself up. The other bears surrounded her, their armor and scarves hiding their identity. The one that stood directly in front of her raised a club. With no more hope to help her to keep going, their victim lowered her head and prepared herself for the blow.

"You picked a bad day to cross paths with me." A voice said. Lifting her head, the young red-fur saw another stranger had a firm grip on the club, preventing the larger warrior from striking.

"Get out of the way!" he tried to yell but he was just as out of breath as his victim.

"Poor choice of words." The silver-furred female panda said. She quickly kicked the warrior away, causing the other members of the group to close in. They all lunged for her at the same time, but her senses were sharp and her movements quick. She fought with her paws and used kicking techniques to throw the others off balance. Even though she was outnumbered, she had the energy to easily fend off the exhausted group. Four of the members suddenly fled in the opposite direction of the forest while one stood behind the silver fighter with a blade raised in the air. She turned while he struck, but his attack was blocked by the staff of a much larger panda.

"I strongly advise you leave this place." He said in a serious tone.

"We will return to claim our prize. If you decide to get in our way again, we

will cut you down!" The furious warrior growled before quickly disappearing into the trees where his allies had gone.

"That was very impressive, Feleine!" The large panda praised. His voice had completely changed from serious to light and cheerful.

"I just don't like how aggressive they were. Do you have any idea who they were or where they came from?" Feleine asked.

"That I do not, but they are gone for now. Besides, there is still another stranger here and I think we should find out why they were after her. But first, it seems like we have to find her ourselves."

The red-fur had managed to sneak away in the fight and found a tree to sit behind. She was lost, exhausted, and could not shake the constant fear of the mysterious bears returning to try to capture her. Suddenly, the silver-fur appeared through the large leaves of the bushes.

"You may have escaped from them, but this is no place to rest unless you just want to wait for them to return." She said and easily lifted the exhausted redfur from the ground.

"We should take her back to the town and keep her there before the others return." The large male suggested and the trio headed toward a path toward the town.

"Hey! I was getting worried!" a female greeted as the two returned through the front gates of the town.

"We were on our way back when we got stuck in the middle of a strange chase between five cloaked bears and this one here." He said as he turned his snout to the sleeping red-fur in Feleine's arms.

"How is it that you manage to find trouble every time you leave these walls, Ironclaw?"

"Well, this time, we may have found trouble, but it was not us in the trouble at least." He replied

"I see. Just be sure to let me know when they return. Let Snakestrike in on the fun next time, ok?" she said as she winked at Ironclaw before glancing at the red-fur again and walked away.

"Should we bring her to the healer's building?" Feleine asked.

"She does not appear to have any injuries. I'm sure with rest and with plenty of food she'll be on her feet again in no time."

"So, the inn then?"

"Hmm, I was thinking that she would stay with us, at the academy."

"The academy?" Feleine questioned. "But those rooms are only for students. We've never even seen this girl and we're going to just take her in?"

"The academy is a place for learning, my student. We have much to learn from our new stranger. She will stay with us."

"But, in which room then?"

"Yours of course." Ironclaw laughed.

"What? Why? I like being on my own."

"Well, she'll need someone to look after her and show her around. I cannot do it since I have to train the other students."

"And I have to train! I can't watch out for her and focus on my skills at the same time."

"Feleine, all you do is train. You are one of my top students for a reason. However, it is not good to be alone so much. If you want it to have more reason, I now task you with staying with this mysterious red-fur. Teach her and learn from her. You might have a better chance to befriend her than you've had with your fellow students." Ironclaw finished and he walked toward the large building in the distance that was the academy.

"Great." Feleine grumbled to herself. She stood there for a moment to think about how she was supposed to train while watching out for a stranger she found in the forest outside the town.

"Hey, what's your name?" the red-fur whispered.

"Uh, Feleine."

"Wow, pretty name. Mine's Saraynea. Where are we?" Saraynea asked.

"This is The Blossoming Hillside." Feleine said. Saraynea looked at her new surroundings, glancing from the nearby buildings, plant life, and even the petals that sat on the stone path.

"Anyway, I guess I should take you to the academy so you can rest."

"Oh, thank you." Saraynea said as she looked up at Feleine who could clearly see the exhaustion in Saraynea's blue eyes. After taking a few steps, Saraynea redted her head on Feleine's shoulder as she began to fall asleep again. "And thank you, Feleine, for saving me back there." Was the last thing she had said before falling silent for the rest of the trip.

The next morning, Feleine woke up and glanced at the second bed in the room. She was surprised to see that Saraynea was not resting. After leaning up and stretching, she noticed a smell coming from the kitchen just outside the bedroom. She made her way out of the room to find that Saraynea was pouring tea into two cups on the table.

"Oh, good morning! I hoped the smell would get you out of bed. I couldn't wake you up myself. I'd feel too bad." Saraynea greeted. Feleine did not expect her new roommate to have such a cheerful personality, especially with how she found Saraynea weak and afraid in the forest the previous evening. Feleine slowly sat across from Saraynea where a full cup of tea sat before her. She took a quick sniff and as she acknowledged the delicious aroma, her mouth began to water and she took a gulp.

"Wow, this is pretty good." Feleine said shyly.

"I'm glad you like it! Oh, I have a favor to ask, before I forget."

"What is it?"

"Can you bring me to whoever helped you save me yesterday? I never had a chance to thank him."

"Master Ironclaw? Sure. He probably wants to talk to you too." After they finished their tea, Saraynea followed Feleine to Master Ironclaw's office in the academy.

"It's great to see you so full of energy after being chased like that. You're very quick to recover." Ironclaw said. Saraynea and Feleine sat across from him in the small room that was his office. "I have so many questions...but where to begin? Where are you from?" he asked.

"I don't remember actually." Saraynea said in a low voice.

"Don't remember? How long were you running from those masked

warriors?"

"It feels like it's been weeks. I don't even know what they want from me, but I just get a feeling that I don't want to find out."

"Where were you before they appeared?"

"I never lived in a town. I'm a wanderer."

"Sounds interesting! Did you travel in a team?"

"No, I've been all by myself for as long as I can remember." Both Feleine and Ironclaw stared at Saraynea with both curiosity and surprise.

"All by yourself? Isn't that lonely?"

"Sometimes, but I'm never truly alone out there. I play with the spirits when I get bored or lonely."

"The spirits? Are you perhaps a shaman then?" Ironclaw stroked his beard as he became more intrigued with Saraynea's tale.

"Yeah that's right." Saraynea said cheerfully.

"Ah! So very fascinating! It's such a rarity to find shamans. We specialize in training strong warriors here to protect our peaceful home. Perhaps Feleine can show you around town?"

"Sounds like fun!" Saraynea said as she glanced at Feleine who turned away.

"I'll meet you outside." Feleine said. Saraynea quickly stood up and rushed outside to start her tour. Feleine looked up at Ironclaw.

"Feleine, you haven't even spent a day with her. Give her a chance." The tone of his voice was almost so that he was begging Feleine. Seeing that he was not going to change his mind, she stood up and joined Saraynea outside.

A female panda approached Saraynea. "Hey there! Great to see you up and around! Means I'll get to see your fighting style soon!"

"Oh..." Feleine noticed that Saraynea was confused.

"Saraynea, this is Master Snakestrike. She teaches after you graduate from Master Ironclaw's classes."

"Oh right. I forgot you were passed out when we first met!" Snakestrike

chuckled through her teeth to prevent losing grip on her chopsticks.

"I passed out?" Saraynea whispered to Feleine.

"Twice." Feleine answered. Saraynea looked down in embarrassment.

"Aw you are adorable!" Snakestrike cheered. "I'd still love to see your fighting style sometime, but I've got a batch of students to train. Maybe you could spar with Feleine until then. Unlike my current students, she trains a lot, so you could learn a thing or two from each other. I'll see you two around." Snakestrike finished before walking away.

"After seeing how you fought off those bears in the forest, it's clear that you must train a lot." Saraynea said to Feleine.

"Well, I'm one of the top students, but even the best have to keep up with daily routines to keep in shape."

"Wow, one of the top? I'd love to see how you trained to become that strong."

"She stands in one place and punches the same wooden target over and over." A voice said. Feleine's expression became even more serious than usual. Saraynea turned to see three bears walking up to her. One walked in front of the others like she was the leader. One of her followers was a smaller female covered in a long robe and the other was a large male who seemed to be the muscles of the group. "Her training is perfect if one expects to fight wooden enemies their whole life." The leader teased, her words clearly directed toward Feleine.

"What do you even want?" Feleine asked.

"Oh, how rude. We just wanted to say hi to our new neighbor." She replied turning her attention to Saraynea. "I'm so sorry about her bad attitude. I'm sure this isn't the first time you've seen it." Saraynea felt like she was in a very awkward position. She had an idea that there was some history between Feleine and the panda that stood before her.

"See? She's not interested in talking to you. So why don't you..." Feleine started.

"No one tells me what to do." The panda growled as she stood as close to Feleine as she could. Saraynea could see that Feleine was trying to stand her

ground. "Especially not you." She finished and Feleine took a step back, causing the trio leader to snicker with delight. "Weak as always."

"Hey, Lyra, we can pick a fight with her any time. Let's do some training first!" the large brown bear said. The leader turned to her group and stepped away from Feleine.

"Master Ironclaw favors her, but she is not the strongest. If you ever want to train with some real warriors, come find us. You're always welcome to be a part of our team." Lyra said to Saraynea before walking away with the others. Saraynea looked at Feleine. Her body seemed frozen in place and her expression was full of anger. Saraynea took as step toward her to catch her attention. When Feleine shyly looked at her, Saraynea could tell that behind the defensive shell she tried to hold, Feleine was hurting inside.

"Hey, don't let what she said bother you." Saraynea said. Feleine looked away. "Why don't we try to unwind at a noodle shop? Or anywhere else you like to go." Without saying anything, Feleine began to walk along the stone path while Saraynea quickly followed.

Saraynea happily slurped her noodles, though she did notice that Feleine refused to eat. She stopped for a moment to watch Feleine use her chopsticks to continuously stir her noodles as she blankly stared into the bowl.

"It's going to get cold if you keep doing that." Saraynea said, but Feleine did not move or show any signs that she heard anything. A gentle smile formed on Saraynea's face as she concentrated a small amount of electric energy at the tip of her toe. She slowly pressed her foot into the bottom of Feleine's to try to get her attention. Feleine's eyes widened and she leaned up from the shock.

"You ok?" Saraynea asked, trying to hold back her giggles.

"Yeah I think my foot just cramped or something." Feleine answered.

"You should really eat that before it gets cold." Saraynea recommended. Feleine looked at her bowl as if she had forgotten it was even there. After a long sigh she nudged the bowl toward Saraynea and looked away. "You sure?"

"I'm not that hungry." Feleine answered. Saraynea felt bad about not knowing what to say to make Feleine feel better. She tried to think as she began to eat her second bowl of noodles.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Saraynea quietly asked.

"No." Feleine snapped back. Saraynea paused again to think of a way to cheer Feleine up. Knowing very little about her, she did not have much to work with.

"Do you want to go to the academy training grounds? Maybe you can use you're built up rage to beat up some targets?" she suggested. Feleine glared at Saraynea for a moment as if she was going to snap at her again.

"Fine." She finally answered and she waited for Saraynea to finish up so they could leave.

It was not hard to find a quiet spot in the academy grounds since it was not a popular day to train. Most students were hanging out and relaxing, leaving most of the training grounds open.

"Well, I knew it wouldn't take long to find you here." Lyra said as she approached Saraynea and Feleine.

"You just can't leave me alone today, can you?" Feleine growled.

"It's not my fault you keep following her around! I find it strange that the loneliest of all bears in this town is the one hanging around with the new girl." Saraynea could easily see that Lyra just wanted an excuse to pick a fight with Feleine.

"Actually, I'm the one following her around." Saraynea couldn't help but try to defend Feleine.

"I hate to tell you, but the truth is you won't learn much from Feleine when it comes to fighting. She fights like a cub." Enraged by the insult, Feleine quickly tried to throw a punch at Lyra who easily caught Feleine's fist in her claws. Saraynea saw her wince in pain as Lyra forced her claws into Feleine's trapped paw. After a long delay, Lyra suddenly began to throw punches and kicks at Feleine who seemed so surprised by the sudden attack that she was unable to adjust and attempt to defend herself. "Come on! Let's see what all your training has done for you!" Lyra taunted and she continued to beat on her target. Saraynea could see Feleine trying to counter and fight back but Lyra blocked and avoided every hit she attempted. Just as suddenly as she started, Lyra stopped attacking. Feleine slowly stood up from the ground and tried to steady herself as blood dripped from her mouth.

"Tch. No wonder you were an orphaned cub." Lyra said.

"What!? In case you've forgotten, you grew up in the same orphanage as I did! We grew up there together!" Feleine yelled back.

"Yet look at how different we are now. That old friendship means nothing."

"You changed when we left."

"Exactly!" Lyra interrupted. "I did change! I became stronger! But what about you? No, you haven't changed at all since then, Feleine. You are still the same weak cub you were back then." She finished. Feleine's breathing grew rapid as she tried to hold back her tears, but it was not long before they began to flood from her eyes and down her cheeks. Without a word, she ran off toward the nearby trees. Saraynea glanced at Lyra. She stood proud of what she had done with a cruel smile on her face as she watched Feleine disappear into the woods. Saraynea was more concerned with finding Feleine than picking a fight with Lyra, so she quickly ran toward the trees.

As soon as she made it to the edge of the forest, Saraynea closed her eyes and focused her hearing. Along the gentle breeze, she could hear Feleine and was able to use the growing sound on the wind to track down where she had gone. It was not long before Saraynea caught sight of Feleine sitting under a tree in front of a lake with her face in her knees and her arms wrapped tight around herself. Saraynea slowly approached her. Soon she was able to hear how loudly Feleine was sobbing on herself.

"Feleine..." Saraynea started.

"Go away!" Feleine yelled without lifting her head.

"Just listen to me ok?" Saraynea kept a gentle tone in her voice.

"You have no idea how I feel right now!" she yelled through her sobs. "Just go away and leave me alone!"

"No, I won't just leave you alone." Saraynea's voice became more serious. "And actually, yeah I do have some idea of how you feel."

"How can you even say that?" Feleine asked as she lifted her head and glared at Saraynea.

"Because I know exactly how it feels to constantly live in darkness. I know what it's like to lie down on a cold bed with an empty stomach." Saraynea said as she sat down next to Feleine.

"You were an orphaned cub too?" Feleine asked. Saraynea nodded and they sat silently together for a moment.

"Why do you let Lyra push you around?" Saraynea asked. Feleine let out a long sigh before she spoke.

"She was my only friend in the orphanage. We always stuck together through everything. When we were finally old enough to leave and join the academy, she just completely changed."

"Why don't you get back at her? Challenge her to another duel?"

"When we were cubs, it was always a joke that I could never beat her in any challenge. Even now I still can't beat her in combat. She's right. I am weak." Feleine said as she buried her face in her knees again.

"What if I challenge her for you?" Saraynea suggested.

"What?" Feleine asked, turning her head so she could look at Saraynea.

"I'll be your champion. I'll fight her in your place."

"You really don't have to do that."

"Ok, how about we make a deal?" Saraynea said as she got up and stood in front of Feleine.

"What kind of deal?" Feleine asked as she looked up.

"I'll challenge her and if I win, you have to let me be your friend."

"Ok..." Feleine said slowly as she stood up. "And what if you lose?"

"Then it's your win. I'll do whatever you want." Saraynea replied though her expression was full of confidence.

"Uhm, ok." Feleine said as she shook her head and sighed. She had never even seen Saraynea fight so she could not help but feel that there was no way for her to win against such a strong opponent.

"One more thing..." Saraynea said. Feleine looked up and saw Saraynea had held up her pinky in front of her.

"You're joking right? Pinky promises are a cub's game..." Feleine said. Saraynea just smiled and wriggled her finger. "Fine." Feleine grumbled as she hooked her pinky around Saraynea's. They pulled their fingers away until the tips of their claw slid against each other, completing the promise.

- "Ok! Let's go!" Saraynea said happily.
- "Right now?"
- "Well, yeah. Why wait?"
- "Don't you want to practice or something first?"
- "Nope. I'm ready." Saraynea began to walk away when Feleine stopped her.
- "Hey, Sara..."
- "Hm?" Saraynea turned to look back for a moment.
- "You don't mind, do you? Can I call you Sara?" Feleine asked shyly.
- "I don't mind at all." Saraynea smiled.
- "Just don't tell anyone ok? About the promise. It really is just a cub's game." she finished. Saraynea replied with laughter.

"I won't tell anyone." Saraynea said and she and Feleine quickly made their way through the forest to return to the academy grounds.

Finding Lyra was simple as she was right where she had fought with Feleine. She stood with her two followers as they talked. The female dressed in a robe looked at Saraynea and Feleine approaching and pointed at them, causing Lyra to turn around.

- "Once wasn't enough, Feleine?" She snickered.
- "Actually, I want to challenge you." Saraynea said.
- "Really?" Lyra seemed interested, "Are you sure?"
- "As sure as can be."

"Confident. Ok then. Let's see how you fight." Lyra said. Her friends and Feleine took a few steps away to give them more room to fight. "Let me know when you're ready!"

"First move is yours." Saraynea replied. Immediately, Lyra rushed toward Saraynea and began to throw quick punches, all them easily dodged or blocked. Feleine and Lyra's gang suddenly all tensed up as they realized how big the fight was going to be. Lyra's quick strikes continued while Saraynea seemed to be barely trying. Feleine was amazed at how easily she was able to defend herself

when Lyra had just beaten her with the same exact technique. "You call this a fight?" Saraynea questioned.

"I'm just warming up!" Lyra growled, clearly angry. Her attacks became less swift, but had more power behind them. Saraynea concentrated more on avoiding the stronger blows instead of blocking them. She used both her arms to block a strong downward strike from Lyra. They glared at each other for a moment.

"Are you almost done warming up?" Saraynea said with a sassy smile and confident look in her eyes. Lyra growled before answering.

"You're mocking me when you haven't even made an attempt at an attack!"

"Is that a dare?" Saraynea questioned. She could see slight fear behind the rage in Lyra's green eyes. Saraynea backed away and held out her palm at Lyra. Before she could land another attack, a strong gust of wind rushed from Saraynea's paw, forcing Lyra back a few steps to steady herself. She backed into a stand with training staves and she quickly grabbed one and began to focus her attacks at Saraynea's legs. Feleine watched in amazement as Saraynea seemed to easily dance around all of Lyra's moves. Saraynea brought her paws close together. Bright strands of blue electricity began to wildly dance around her paws until she pushed the power from her palms toward Lyra. The force pushed her back and she landed on the ground. She sat up as her two followers quickly made their way to her side to make sure she was ok. Feleine slowly approached Saraynea. She had no idea what to say to her. She felt both impressed and somewhat fearful of Saraynea's power. Yet when Saraynea turned to focus her attention to Feleine, she seemed calm and cheerful as always.

"Want to take a walk in the forest again? I really like it there." Saraynea asked. Feleine nodded and they headed toward the trees again, but in a very different mood than the first time.

They had found a comfortable and quiet place deep in the woods where they were able to sit against two trees across from each other.

"Ok!" Saraynea started. "Now that we're friends, I think now would be a great time to get to know each other better." She said happily. Feleine was surprised that Saraynea had taken the promise so seriously. "So, why don't you ask me a question?"

"Like what?"

"Anything you're curious about." Saraynea replied and quietly waited for a question. Feleine stared down at her paws for a few moments before shrugging without looking up.

"Huh, you're really shy." Saraynea said. Feleine glanced up at Saraynea, but quickly looked back down. "Aw come on! You're not curious about anything?"

"Uhm..." Feleine raised her head but looked to the side as she tried to think," You're a shaman, so what's your favorite element then?" she finally asked as she slowly made eye contact with Saraynea.

"My favorite element? I'd have to pick storm."

"Your lightning attacks?" Feleine raised an eyebrow.

"What were you expecting?" Saraynea asked with a laugh.

"I don't know. It's just that lightning is just so vicious and wild and you're so calm." Feleine finished. Saraynea softly laughed at Feleine's statement.

"I never really thought about that. Now, I get to ask you a question." Saraynea concentrated on her question which made Feleine somewhat nervous about what she was going to have to answer. "Where is your favorite place to be?"

"Place? Like a building?"

"Anywhere. If you could spend an entire day just being somewhere with no one to bother you, where would you go?" Feleine paused and looked around her.

"Out here I guess. It's always quiet and peaceful in this forest. It doesn't even need the wall to protect it since it ends right before a steep cliff so no outsiders can enter the town from here."

"That's so nice! I agree with you too. This place is beautiful. I love being surrounded by nature."

"Yeah, there's a really huge tree right by the edge of the cliff."

"Sounds awesome! I want to see it sometime! But first, next question! Ask me another one."

"Another question?"

"You only asked me one so far! What else do you want to know about?"

"Why me?" Feleine asked quietly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You arrive in a town full of new and interesting bears and the only one you want to talk to is me. You haven't even tried to become friends with anyone else. Why?"

"First of all, I'll never forget the one who saved my life. Second, yeah there are a lot of bears here and of all of them, you're the one who needs a friend the most. That's why I chose you." Feleine sat quietly, unsure of how to answer. "You are the shyest bear I have ever known."

"I don't talk to others much."

"Don't worry! We'll get you out of your shell!"

"How exactly do you plan to do that?"

"The very same way you tackle any shell." Saraynea said as she approached Feleine who looked up to her as she continued to sit. "You find the weak spot and then you crack it!" Saraynea quickly began to playfully claw at Feleine's sides causing her to slowly slump down onto her back.

"Get off!" Feleine ordered through her forced laughs, but Saraynea completely ignored her. "Sara, stop! I said get off!" she cried between laughs before she tucked in her legs and pressed her feet against Saraynea's hips and pushed her off. Saraynea backed away, but approached again to look down at Feleine who glared back at her as her face turned red. "Don't ever do that again." she grumbled. Saraynea giggled as she held out her paw to help pull Feleine up to her feet.

Feleine suddenly woke up to see Saraynea looking down at her. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Get up! Come on, I don't want to miss it!" Saraynea answered.

"See what? The sun isn't even up. Go back to bed." Feleine said and she rolled onto her side and pulled her blanket over her shoulder. Saraynea tugged on the blanket, pulling it completely off Feleine who shivered as a rush of cold air hit her fur.

"Exactly! I want to see the sunrise from that tree you were talking about."

"What tree?" Feleine asked sleepily.

"The big one! Near the edge of the cliff."

"Oh, that one." Feleine yawned. "I'm sure you can find it yourself. I don't really like being that close to the edge. You don't need me to go with you." She finished and she closed her eyes again, so tired that she did not care about her blanket.

"But I want you to!" Saraynea grabbed Feleine's ankles and pulled her so that her legs hung over the edge of her bed.

"Alright, I'm coming." Feleine slowly leaned up and saw that Saraynea was already rushing out the bedroom door. She let out a sigh before changing out of her pajamas.

Saraynea was easily making her way through the forest while Feleine tried to keep up. Being as tired as she was made it rather difficult. The forest began to thin and soon a large tree was visible. Saraynea happily ran toward it and climbed up to the lowest branch. Feleine felt her stomach begin to cramp as she neared and was able to see where the cliff ended. From where they stood, they could see the entire landscape before them. Right below them was a thick forest. Far into the distance they could just see more mountains on the horizon.

"Come on!" Saraynea cheered at Feleine.

"I'd rather not."

"We'll get the best view from up here!"

"I don't like heights." Feleine mumbled.

"I'll keep you safe." Saraynea said as she knelt over and held out her paw. Feleine slowly approached and looked up at Sarayena. "Trust me." She finished. Feleine let out a long sigh before slowly climbing up. She grabbed Saraynea's paw and was pulled up to the branch. She tightly clung onto the trunk with her claws. "Is that comfortable?" Saraynea asked.

"I'm fine." Feleine tried to sound serious but her voice badly shook with fear. "Why are we up here again?" she quickly asked.

"You'll soon see." Saraynea said as she raised one of her arms to grab a branch above her head to help her keep her balance as they waited. After a few moments of shivering from the cold air, Feleine notice a bright orange light forming in the distance. The sun slowly rose and as its rays hit the trees, the forest seemed to come to life as if nature itself could not wait for the warmth of the new morning.

As Feleine began to appreciate the beauty, she felt less cold and less afraid as she forgot she was even standing on a tree branch, clinging to it with all the strength in her paws. She glanced at Saraynea who was fully focused on the sun. Her red fur shined and she seemed just as full of energy as the rising sun. Feleine was mesmerized at Saraynea's beauty as the rays hit her. Sensing she was being stared at, Saraynea slightly turned her head so she could glance at Feleine, who quickly turned back to face the world below them.

"It's beautiful, huh?" Saraynea said breaking what had been a long silence.

"Yeah, I never watched the sun come up before."

"Really? Well, I'm glad I got to be here for your first sunrise!" Saraynea cheered. "Do you want to get down now?"

"Yeah, let's get away from the edge." Feleine quickly climbed down from the tree and took a few steps back. Saraynea easily jumped down and approached Feleine.

"You ok? I didn't know you were afraid of heights."

"No, no. I'm fine. I've just never been that close before."

"Don't get too close..." A voice said. Saraynea and Feleine both turned and saw Lyra and her two followers standing close. "You might fall off and it's a long way down."

"Why does it seem like they follow us?" Saraynea whispered to Feleine.

"I wish I knew." Feleine grumbled.

"Hey, it's our town too!" Lyra said. "I have to admit though, I'm impressed Feleine. So, is your fear of heights magically gone?" Lyra teased.

"Hey, back off." Saraynea stepped in front of her friend. "Everyone has something they're afraid of."

"Yes, I understand why the weak would have fears, but not us. We have nothing to fear since we can stop anything that gets in our way." Lyra said and she and her team approached Saraynea and Feleine, who backed away.

"You don't want to fight me again." Saraynea said.

"Actually, I do!" Lyra snapped. "I went easy on you before!" She quickly moved into a battle stance, causing Saraynea to do the same. "I'll knock you over like I did to that cub over there!" Feleine's stomach turned into a knot as she knew Lyra was talking about her. When she saw Lyra's allies stand beside her, she stood next to Saraynea and prepared to fight. "Hm, two against three still keeps the odds with us, but just in case..." Lyra said and her bulky friend grabbed Feleine's throat and lifted her off the ground. Saraynea backed off in fear of what they would do.

"Let her go!" She ordered.

"Let her go? Ok then." Lyra nodded at Feleine's captor and he approached the edge of the cliff. Feleine frantically clawed at his arms, but he seemed unaffected and laughed.

"Ha! Your puny claws cannot harm me!" he said.

"Are you crazy!?" Saraynea yelled at Lyra.

"You know, I'm actually disappointed in you." Lyra said to Saraynea. "I really thought you'd make a pretty great ally. Sadly, you sided with *that one* over there which just confuses me, but in the end the ally of my enemy is also my enemy." Lyra paused and glared at Saraynea. From where she was, Feleine could see the last member of Lyra's group preparing a fireball in her claws at a distance while Saraynea continued to focus on Lyra.

"Sara!" Feleine tried to warn but, her captor tightened his grip causing Feleine to choke on her words. The fire attack was thrown right toward Saraynea who quickly raised her paw toward the attack and caught the fire in her palm, as if she knew it was coming. Everyone stared at her in amazement.

"You're going to have to do much better than that." Saraynea growled.

"Alright then." Lyra said and she charged at Saraynea. Right before she could land an attack, Saraynea held up her paw and a strong gust of wind pushed Lyra back. After regaining her balance, Lyra charged right back. Saraynea pushed her foot away from her, causing spikes of earth to form along Lyra's path. She quickly dodged and tried to attack from the side. When Saraynea raised her paw, the spikes plucked from the ground and formed a circle around Saraynea's arm. She performed a punch motion in the air, sending the rock spikes toward Lyra. As she tried to dodge the spikes, Saraynea was able to keep control over them and was able to make them chase wherever Lyra ran. Seeing

that they were unavoidable, Lyra turned to face them and raised her arms to cover her face. The spikes rushed passed her, causing her to receive several cuts on her arms. When they stopped, she lowered her defense, but one more spike struck the side of her face, causing a deeper cut than the ones she had on her arms.

"Are you sure about this, Lyra? She seems really strong." The female caster said.

"Be quiet Fira! Ox, do it now!" Lyra yelled out.

"Lyra, you can't be serious! I thought it was a joke!" Fira said with shock in her voice. Even Ox had an unsure expression on his face.

"Yeah, we can get in big trouble if we do this you know." Ox said.

"Now! Or I'll throw you off the mountain too!" Lyra ordered. Fearing Lyra, Ox released his grip on Feleine, dropping her right off the cliff.

"Feleine!!" Saraynea yelled and she ran toward the edge and jumped without any hesitation. Lyra, Ox, and Fira were all shocked at Saraynea's action.

"Fine. They'll never survive that fall." Lyra grumbled.

Saraynea used her wind power to help her catch up to Feleine.

"Just grab on and don't let go!" Saraynea said as she grabbed Feleine's paws and placed them around her shoulders as she turned and faced the side of the mountain. Feleine tightly latched onto Saraynea's back. Saraynea reached and dug her claws and feet into the mountain, trying to get a grip on the earth to slow their fall. Feleine closed her eyes, sure that they would not survive. Saraynea's paws began to burn, but she refused to let go. When her claws ripped through a patch of weak earth, she lost her grip and began to fall away from the mountain. They soon passed through the tree tops and crashed into a strong branch, causing Feleine to lose her grip on Saraynea and making them fall separately until they hit the ground.

"Ow..." Feleine was surprised that she did not lose consciousness from the hard landing, but she did feel dizzy as she stood up. "Are you ok?" She asked Saraynea who had fallen not too far.

"Yeah, I'm ok." She replied. Feleine looked at Saraynea's paws and saw that she was holding them awkwardly, as if she was in pain. She gently took them and turned them so she could see her palms. Both paws were bloody and badly scratched.

"I don't know about your definition of ok, but this is not ok." Feleine said.

"Wait..." Saraynea said quietly.

"What?"

"Shhh!" Saraynea focused on her feet. She was able to sense several footsteps approaching. "Oh no." She whimpered. "They're coming!"

"What are you talking about?" Feleine asked. Suddenly several heavily covered warriors surrounded them. Feleine instantly recognized them as the warriors who were attacking Saraynea on the day they had met.

"Alright." One said as he approached Saraynea who was visibly shaking in fear. "We'll give you the option again: Come with us, or we'll take you by force, and trust me, this will be a lot easier if you just..."

"Never!" Saraynea yelled and she kicked at the warrior.

"You little brat! Let's just get this over with." He said and the other warriors rushed in and grabbed onto Saraynea and Feleine, preventing them from fighting back or running away, though they still struggled as much as they could. Another mysterious bear walked up to Saraynea with a long thin wooden rod. He was pushing something inside before he aimed it at Saraynea and placed his mouth over the other end. With a quick forceful breath, a small needle stuck to Saraynea's arm.

"Let me go!" She cried out and suddenly violent jolts of blue electricity began to shock all the bears who held onto her, causing them to let go. She tried to keep a steady fighting stance, but her legs began to quiver and she fell to the ground after a few moments.

"What about this one?" one of the bears who held Feleine asked.

"Put her out too. We don't need her running off and getting help."

"We're taking her with us?"

"If she proves completely useless, we'll just kill her. Now come on, I want to get back to the camp."

"I hope she isn't as feisty." The bear with the rod said as he prepared

another needle. As soon as it was ready, he placed his mouth on the other end and Feleine soon felt a sharp pain in her arm and she quickly fell asleep just as Saraynea had.

#### Part 2

Feleine heard voices before she opened her eyes. They were quiet and mixed together as she regained her consciousness. The voices started to split and she could tell that there were several bears nearby. Finally able to open her eyes, she saw that she was taken to a camp where several of the mysterious warriors were, though most of them were not as heavily armored. She tried to move, but found that she was tightly tied to a tree with rope. She saw Saraynea nearby trapped in the same situation except one camp member stood in front of her while others watched nearby. He held out a bowl to her but she kept her head turned.

"Come on! It's just water!" he said, but Saraynea kept her head turned. "Fine!" he growled and he turned the bowl upside-down and placed it on her head, drenching her. The others laughed at his failed attempt to get her to drink. "This is ridiculous! She doesn't want to drink? Fine! Why should we care?" he complained.

"Actually, we do have strict orders to keep her in good health." Another said.

"Maybe she'll eat?" One suggested and he stood up and offered her a piece of bread. When his paw was close enough, Saraynea swiftly bit down, causing her victim to withdraw. "You brat!" he said as he pulled a large dagger from his belt.

"You don't want to do that." A female voice said. Seeing how quickly he stopped, Feleine could see that the female that spoke was clearly in charge. "Really? You can't handle a cub-sitting job?"

"Ah! Captain Venomclaw! We tried harder than we should have to take care of her, especially after having to chase her over and over!"

"I understand and I know that you want her to feel some pain in return for what she's been putting us through. However, we cannot give her any noticeable injuries."

"I will escape. Just like I always do. You've tried and failed so many times to capture me for some grand plan you have. Just like every time, I will escape

and you will fail." She finished. Venomclaw raised her paw and quickly struck at Saraynea's face with her claws, leaving scratch marks along her cheek. Saraynea whimpered from the stinging pain.

"Does...that count as a noticeable injury?" one of them whispered.

"It can be easily healed before Arcantis arrives." The leader replied.

"Arcantis is coming? Here?" one of them questioned.

"Yes, that's right. I don't want to risk losing her again so I called on him to pick her up himself. Being as strong a mage as he is, he can easily create a portal to bring her back to main base." She turned her attention back to Saraynea. "We have big plans for you, shaman. Once we get you back to our main base, we can begin." She said, trying to make Saraynea nervous.

Forcing focus to her feet, Saraynea was able to influence the earth beneath her to force a spike up, cutting the ropes from the other side of the tree. Free of her bonds, she radiated a shock wave to stun the warriors around her. She rushed toward Feleine and used her fire power to burn the ropes. Most of the camp rushed toward their leader to make sure she was ok.

"Don't worry about me! Just get the shaman!" she roared as Saraynea and Feleine rushed to get away.

They sprinted as quickly as they could through the trees. When they stopped for a moment, Saraynea quickly tried to speak to Feleine through her gasps for air.

"Feleine, just get out of here. Go back to your town."

"What?" Feleine asked, surprised by the comment.

"Look, they just want me! They won't go after you. I don't want to see you get hurt because of me." They both perked their ears and looked behind them at the sound of snapping twigs. "Just go!" Saraynea ordered and she began to run again, hoping that Feleine would not follow her. She often paused to listen for where her enemies were before running in the opposite direction. She looked over her shoulder to make sure no one was following her, causing her to trip over a root and slide down a short slope. As she stood up, a paw wrapped around her mouth and she was pulled up against someone.

"Relax! It's me!" Feleine whispered in Saraynea's ear and she removed her paw.

"I told you to go back!" Saraynea replied.

"Over here!" Feleine said as she grabbed Saraynea's wrist and lead her in a small area beneath some large, twisted roots. The space was cramped and they both had just enough room to hide.

"You really think they won't see us down here?" Saraynea asked, causing Feleine to cover her mouth again. They stared up at the roots above them. One of the warriors stopped right in front of the tree they hid under. Saraynea whimpered in fear into Feleine's paw.

"This is not good." She said as another member joined her.

"You don't need to tell me that." he replied.

"Arcantis is going to be so mad when he finds out we lost her!"

"Things may have been a little calmer if Venomclaw didn't push her so hard!"

"It's not like we could have ignored her orders and if we made any suggestions, she would have ignored us completely. There was nothing we could have done."

"I don't see them around here. Let's move on." They finished their conversation and moved on. Feleine and Saraynea sighed with relief and sat quietly in their hiding spot.

"Why didn't you go back?" Saraynea asked quietly.

"Ironclaw told me to look out for you. Also..." Feleine started but suddenly stopped.

"Also...?" Saraynea repeated, curious about what Feleine was trying to say.

"We did that promise thing." Feleine said quietly, as if she was embarrassed by the very mention of it.

"The promise? To be my friend?" Saraynea questioned as she softly laughed in amusement.

"Look, I've never ignored promises. I'm not going to start now." She paused for a moment. "Come on, let's get out of here." After they got up and patted away most of the dirt on their clothes, Feleine glanced at Saraynea's paws and cheek. The wounds were bloody and looked painful. A quick look at her

surroundings was all Feleine needed to find the herbs she could use to cover Saraynea's cuts.

"Thanks! That feels much better." Saraynea said.

"It's not as good as bandages, but at least they're covered for now. The town healer would be able to fix you up in no time."

"I feel like we should warn your academy masters that these creeps are still out here. How do we get back?"

"I've never been off the mountain." Feleine admitted.

"Let's go this way then!" Saraynea said cheerfully and she began to walk.

"We have no idea where we are and those weird bears are still looking for us! How are you so calm?"

"Well, sitting here won't do anything. We have to end up somewhere as long as we keep going."

"So, we're just going to blindly walk through the forest?" Feleine could not understand how Saraynea was thinking.

"You can sit here if you want to, or you can follow me." Saraynea said. Without much thought, Feleine slowly followed where Saraynea walked.

Their pace slowed as they grew tired, but their legs refused to stop walking. Suddenly, Saraynea stopped, allowing Feleine to walk passed her for a few steps before turning around.

"What is it?" Feleine asked. Saraynea looked back behind them. Her ears perked and rotated. Feleine noticed that Saraynea's fur was raised and her tail seemed to quickly flick around nervously.

"Maybe it's nothing. Let's keep going." Saraynea said, but they only took a few steps when she quickly turned again. She closed her eyes and focused on her elemental abilities, listening to the wind and sensing movement using the earth. Feleine silently watched in anticipation of what Saraynea was sensing. "We should move." Saraynea said quietly, but with alarm.

"Is there something out there? Is it those those bears again?" Feleine asked.

"Run!" She said and grabbed Feleine's wrist to get her moving. As they ran, Feleine started to hear twigs breaking from all directions and it was quickly

becoming closer. Just as suddenly as she began to run, Saraynea came to a halt. Not as prepared, Feleine slid passed Saraynea. As she backed up to be closer, she saw many shadowy figured appearing from the trees, surrounding them. Saraynea looked over her shoulder, but there was no time to avoid the spell attack that had targeted her, forcing her away from Feleine, who turned to see who started the fight.

"So...which one is the shaman?" the robed bear asked.

"The red one, Arcantis. The one you just hit." a warrior standing beside him answered.

"Oh, don't worry about that. It was a weak attack. So, this is her little friend then? She doesn't look very strong. I don't even see how she could benefit the clan." he said, glaring at Feleine. She was able to see a purple mage aura radiating from him. He formed a large mass of purple magic in his paws. "I can't believe you've been having this much trouble with this mission." he growled at his team. "Once this one is out of the way, I trust that you will be able to grab the shaman?" he finished and sent the mass of pure arcane energy at Feleine. She knew she needed to move out of the way, but her legs refused to move. Another unexpected force pushed Feleine away, causing her to lose her balance and fall to the ground. She looked up and watched the attack of pure offensive energy rush into Saraynea's abdomen. The force sent the red panda flying off her feet until her back slammed into a tree. A spray of blood flew from her mouth at the impact. Her body seemed heavy as she landed face down on the ground with no effort to make a better landing. All the mysterious group members stared in a fearful amazement including their leader.

"What do we do now, Arcantis?" a warrior asked with a shaken voice. The leader's expression was a combination of fear and rage.

"We...we have to retreat for now." He said nervously. "The target has sustained massive damage."

"Is it even possible that she even survived that attack?"

"We need to bring this update to the master right away." He said as he formed a portal beside him and rushed through in a state of panic. The rest of his team followed and the portal closed after the last member passed through.

Feleine continued to lie on the ground, trying to recover from what she had just witnessed. Seeing that Saraynea was not moving, she gathered all her strength to

lift herself up though her body felt heavy and stiff.

"Sara?" she called as she gently turned Saraynea onto her back. She froze after forcing her eyes to Saraynea's stomach. Her shirt was already drenched with blood. Feeling a rush of energy, she quickly gathered large leaves and placed them next to Saraynea. Pulling up her shirt exposed a massive wound that Feleine could not even judge in size or shape due to the amount of blood Saraynea was losing through it. Fearing how much of a loss it was, Feleine decided to just place the leaves along Saraynea's entire stomach to help cover the wound. She glanced at Saraynea's face, hoping that she would make any kind of movement or expression of being conscious.

"Why?" Feleine whimpered as she could no longer hold back her tears. "We've only just met and you risked your life for mine?" She felt confused at how quickly Saraynea had acted in order to save her. She suddenly felt sick at the fact that she even needed Saraynea's help to avoid the attack at all. "Just please..." She begged as she began to sob, resting her paw on Saraynea's stomach. "Don't die on me!" she said as her crying hit its worst stage. Tears flooded down her cheeks and she suddenly gasped like she had the hiccups through her sobbing. With her eyes tightly shut and her mind racing with thoughts of concern and fear, she was unaware of the thin jade flame-like energy forming around the paw that rested on the wound. The flame grew and began to swirl around her wrist before slowly flowing into Saraynea's wound. The flame gently made its way to the core of the wound, mending it just enough to slow down the severe bleeding that had been happening.

After her crying calmed, Feleine knew that water would do them both good, but she feared that Saraynea would be attacked while she was gone. Her crying had left her tired and light headed, but she continued to give all her remaining energy toward Saraynea. She thought about performing small tasks like making a fire just to keep her busy. After making a comforting fire nearby and gathering more leaves to replace the ones on Saraynea's wound, Feleine's stomach growled. She knew that without any energy, she would not be able to protect Saraynea from any future threats, no matter how minor. She ventured into the forest in search of food, but made sure to not go too far from the camp she was building. Each time she frequently returned to the area, she had a little hope that Saraynea would be awake, but as the hours passed by, it seemed like Saraynea would not open her eyes that day.

Feleine woke up, still not sure how she managed to fall asleep as she kept a close watch on Saraynea's condition over a few days. She noticed that her cheeks seemed red where she thought the fur was normally white. She gently pressed her paw against the redness and noticed how warm the fur was.

"No, you can't be." Feleine said as she pressed her paw against Saraynea's forehead. She was burning up. As much as she did not want to leave, Feleine quickly rushed to find a source of water. She was thankful that she found a small lake not too far away. She pulled her shirt from under her belt and used her fangs to tear a long strip of cloth which the plunged into the water. She placed the wet cloth on Saraynea's forehead, hoping that it would help soothe the fever. She felt even more stressed now that not only was Saraynea terribly injured, but had had grown sick as well. She knew there was nothing else she could do but stay near her and closely monitor her condition.

Days later, after she had woken up, Feleine immediately noticed that Saraynea was missing. Fear rushed through her as she tried to think of where she should search first and what may have happened to her. The rush of thoughts stopped when she heard a loud splash coming from where the lake was. She rushed over to find Saraynea standing at the edge. She steadied herself and moved her paws, causing the water to shift with her control, though it was clear that she was struggling. She suddenly stopped and knelt down, grabbing her stomach, causing Feleine to dash to her side.

"What are you doing!?" Feleine yelled. "You shouldn't be up and walking around!"

"There you are." Saraynea weakly greeted. "I didn't want to wake you. I woke up and felt really weak, but I did sense some water nearby so I came over. I'm so tired and I can barely influence the elements." As she finished, Saraynea expressed more of her exhaustion as she slowly tried to sit down.

"Do you remember what happened several days ago?"

"Days ago? No not really actually." Saraynea replied as she began to try to remember.

"We were attacked." Feleine knelt down to meet Saraynea's eyes. "By a mage who seemed to lead that group of warriors who have been chasing you."

"That's right! That spell! You didn't get hurt, did you?"

"Me? Have you not noticed your own wound!?" Saraynea was surprised at Feleine's statement. "You're also sick! You should be resting." She finished as she helped Saraynea stand up and led her back. After returning to the camp and spending a moment looking into her weak eyes, Feleine realized how happy she was to see Saraynea was finally awake. She began to fight back tears that began to form in her eyes.

"Are you ok?" Saraynea asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Feleine answered, but Saraynea could easily see how she felt and put her arms around her.

"Thanks for helping me again. I'm so sorry for all the trouble I'm causing you." Saraynea said with flattned ears.

"Look, you don't have to worry about me." Feleine said as she backed away from the hug. "We need to get you to a town. You're only going to get worse if we stay out here." Feleine said and they began to walk through the forest.

Arcantis slowly made his way up along the trail up a large mountain, trying to plan what to say to his master and leader of the heavily cloaked group who targeted Saraynea. He knew that she was to not be harmed and struggled to come up with an explanation to reduce the chances of him receiving a harsh punishment. The warriors saluted him as he walked by, though he barely noticed them while he was in deep thought. He stood before the cave's entrance. He was not far from his master, but he still struggled to plan out what to say to him. The cold dark path led to a larger open room. At the far end stood a huge brown bear who stared at the wall as if he was studying it.

"Arcantis. You finally return." He said before slowly turning around. "Empty handed it seems."

"Ah yes, my master, Darkstorm, you see there were some complications in the mission." Arcantis said.

"Yes, that's rather obvious. It's quit concerning to me when my top commanders struggle to capture a young and weakened red panda. Tell me, have your camps been full of supplies like you requested so often?"

"Y-yes sir."

"And have I not been patient enough to allow your teams to have enough rest so that they can use all their energy to complete this mission?"

"You have been very patient, which we have been very appreciative for."

"So then why!?" a sharp wind began to rush around the room and the floor cracked and shook. "Where is my shaman!?" flames engulfed his massive paws. Arcantis swallowed hard with fear. "Do you understand how hard it was to even find a shaman? If we lose this one, we may never get a chance to complete our goal!"

"I understand Master. It's just that she's strong and witty." Arcantis' voice lowered as he finished his statement.

"Excuse me, it's my mistake not being able to hear your mumbling. You said she's *strong*, correct?" Darkstorm said, leaning closer to Arcantis. "If my commanders can't handle this, it is either because you are not worthy of such a position or she is stronger than me. Which is it then?"

"Eh well, clearly no shaman is more powerful than you, my master!"

"So, it is you who is weak then."

"N-no! Actually, my power is what has made this mission more complicated."

"How so?"

"She has an ally accompanying her. A monk, however she still got in our way. I prepared to get rid of her."

"And how could you possibly mess that up?"

"My attack kind of...the target ran in the way..."

"You damaged the shaman!?" Darkstorm roared. Arcantis thought for sure that Darkstorm was going to kill him right where he stood. Instead he seemed to calm himself down. "How badly injured is she?"

"Well, it wasn't one of my stronger spells at least."

"Is she dead or not!?" Darkstom's rage sparked to life again.

"I'm not sure, Master! I returned right away to inform you."

"How can you not know!?" Darkstorm's paws became engulfed with flames again as he began to prepare to attack Arcantis. He stopped and thought for a moment. "Return to where that fight took place. If she's dead, she should be nearby. If she survived, then head to the town just outside the forest's edge.

That's where they would head to next. Just in case, I'll send Venomclaw to scout the forest's edge just in case their path changes. I want your teams to communicate often. Apparently it takes two squads to capture one little shaman."

#### Part 3

"Am I walking too fast?" Feleine asked as she paused and turned to see Saraynea trying to catch up. Even though she tried to keep her usual cheerful attitude, it was obvious that she was in a lot of pain and struggled to keep up.

"I'm ok." She said through tired pants. "Sorry you have to stop for me so much."

"You really don't have to apologize." Feleine said quietly. *You're the one* who saved me after all. I'm just glad you survived. She thought. They continued to walk together when suddenly they were both surrounded in a net trap that raised them above the ground as it closed.

"Well, didn't even see that one coming." Saraynea's laugh quickly turned into painful coughing. When she settled down she groaned and held her stomach from the pain.

"Do you think this was set up by them?" Feleine asked, suddenly becoming fearful that the clan members who kept chasing them were the ones who set the trap for them."

"Honestly," Saraynea said weakly, "If it was them, I think they'd have come out already. They have no reason to wait if they trapped us."

"That's true. Let's see if we can get out of here." Feleine tried to move but the trap was tight and she barely had any room with Saraynea right next to her. She would have been able to cut the net if she had a blade on her. She knew Saraynea did not have a weapon of any kind and knowing how weak she was, it would have been too much to even ask her to use her fire powers to burn it. They both turned when they heard someone approaching and quietly waited to see when they would reveal themselves through the plants. A female panda with a well-crafted bow slowly walked through the leaves and glared at them.

"Well this is disappointing." she said.

"So, this is your trap?" Feleine asked.

"Isn't that obvious?" the female replied.

"Could you let us down?"

"I'd like to know what you're doing so close to my territory before I decide to let you go." She said as she raised her bow at the net.

"Woah! There's no need for that! We don't have any weapons on us! We're just lost, ok? We were attacked and my friend here is badly injured. I just want to know where to nearest town is so I can bring her to a healer." Feleine's tone softened into a plea. The hunter paused as she thought. Without saying anything, she pulled her arrow back. Feleine did not even have time to react when the arrow silently flew passed her, cutting the net and allowing Feleine and Saraynea to slide out. Saraynea had a harder time landing on her feet, but she was able to keep her balance. The hunter approached her and pulled Saraynea's paw away from her stomach. Beneath the blood-stained shirt, the leaves Feleine had used to cover the wound were becoming undone, causing the wound to bleed between the leaves.

"All my supplies are back at my nest. Come with me." The hunter said and she began to walk away.

"Thank you...uh..." Feleine started. The hunter turned around.

"Mynh." She said.

"Thank you Mynh." Feleine lowered her head in respect. "I'm Feleine and this is Saraynea."

"We'd better get moving before your friend's wound becomes infected." Mynh said and she began to lead the way again. "Through here." Mynh said as she moved some vines, revealing a passage behind. Feleine and Saraynea walked in. There was a small room littered with pots, furs, woven baskets and other supplies. Hanging from the ceiling were ropes that had clay bowls hanging in a column. Feleine was impressed with how well Mynh had tied them so the bowls would not spill over their contents.

"Wow, this place is impressive." Feleine said.

"Just don't touch my stuff." Mynh said as she moved around the pile of furs that made up her bed. "Lie down here." She said to Saraynea. Mynh was removing the leaves from her stomach. Next to her she had a large satchel that held her medical supplies. She turned her head when she heard a soft clicking sound which was a result of Feleine bumping into one of the hanging sets of bowls.

"Sorry." Feleine said shyly. After Mynh had turned to continue, Feleine felt a shiver from the glare she had received from Mynh's sharp green eyes.

"Do you live here?" Saraynea spoke for the first time in a while.

"It's not much, but it's home." Mynh pulled a bottle from her bag and drenched a cloth with the liquid. "This is going to sting a lot." Feleine was surprised at how straightforward Mynh was. Her words were proven true when Saraynea cried out when the cloth touched her wound. She forced her jaw shut, trying to not yell out again, but she still moaned and even whimpered after Mynh lifted the cloth.

"Well, that was an honest warning." Saraynea said.

"I tend to say it as it is. This is a pretty bad wound. How did you get hurt?" Feleine ears dropped. Whenever she thought about it, she felt like it was her fault that Saraynea had become so badly hurt. *If I'd just gotten out of the way. If I had just moved!* 

"We were attacked a few days ago. One of them tried to hit Feleine with a spell..."

"You got in the way." Mynh easily predicted the end of the story. "Even common thugs don't attack with such violence. Who were they?"

"I don't really know to be honest. They've been chasing after me for a while."

"You have no idea what they want from you?"

"Part of me really wants to know, but as soon as I see them, all I can think about is running away."

"We'll be safe in here. I'll guide you to the town tomorrow, but it might take us a few days depending on how fast you can walk." Mynh said.

When the sun set and the moon was high in the dark blue sky, Feleine struggled to find any sleep. She tossed around in the furs she was given to make her own bed. She rolled over and opened her eyes. Through the vines covering the entry, she was able to see stars and got up to look at them in hopes that the night sky would calm her mind. She sat under a tree and stared up.

Even if she is ok to move tomorrow, what if they return? Even with Mynh, Sara is too weak to do much and I was so weak before. What can I do?

"Can't sleep?" Feleine looked up and saw Mynh sitting on a branch in a nearby tree. She hadn't even noticed that she was not in the nest when she walked out. "I'm surprised you don't want to be close to your friend."

"We haven't even known each other for very long." Feleine said.

"But you clearly care for each other. She just seems more expressive about it."

"You can already tell, huh?"

"When you got stuck in my trap, your first reason for wanting to get out of it was to get her to a healer after she took a terrible hit for you."

"You're really observant." Feleine said. Mynh just shrugged in response. Feleine did not try to further the conversation seeing that Mynh also had a quiet nature. They both silently stared up at the stars for a while.

Upon entering the nest when she was ready to return to her bed, Feleine heard a loud snoring coming from where Saraynea was. She walked up to the red panda, and while she was happy to see Saraynea in a deep sleep, she would not be able to sleep herself with such a loud noise nearby. As gently as she could, Feleine pushed on Saraynea's chin, closing her mouth and silencing the snoring. After pulling a pelt over Saraynea, Feleine returned to her fur pile and tried to get some sleep.

Mynh woke Saraynea and Feleine early to start their walk toward the town.

"Here." Mynh tossed a satchel to Feleine before throwing her own over her shoulder and meeting Saraynea outside. Before leaving the nest, Mynh had used netting to cover the entrance before placing large leaves over it to make the nest completely blend in with the surroundings. "Now we can go." She said. Saraynea seemed to have more energy after a comfortable night's rest, though she still expressed signs of pain when having to climb over a large root sticking out of the ground or when having to slide down a steep slope. Suddenly the group stopped when they heard loud splashing sounds followed by a gurgling roar.

"What was that?" Feleine asked.

"I've never even heard a sound like that before." Mynh replied.

"Sounds like..." Saraynea started, but did not finish before running off

toward the sound.

"Sara! Wait!" Feleine yelled as she ran toward Saraynea. They ended up in front of a lake where a massive snake of water was raised at the center, covered with black splotches.

"What is that!?" Feleine's yell caught the creature's attention, causing it to lock its black eyes on her before charging at her. She quickly avoided each attack, yet she had no idea how to fight such a creature. Several arrows began to hit it, but just like throwing them into water, the creature seemed unaffected. It turned to Mynh and spat out the arrows back toward her, but she easily dodged them. The water creature formed arms with long claws which it used to hold both Feleine and Mynh against trees. The pressure of the water against them was enough to prevent them from being able to move. Its head moved close to Feleine, its deep black eyes glaring right into hers. Suddenly the creature backed away and turned its head back toward the lake. Feleine was able to see Saraynea standing on the water. She seemed to be slowly dancing while influencing some water in the air around her. The pressure lessened and Feleine and Mynh were able to stand on the ground again. The water beast put its full focus on Saraynea who continued to dance even when it came close to her. Even when it rose higher above her and roared, she stayed focused on what she was doing.

"Is she a shaman?" Mynh asked as she stood by Feleine's side.

"Yeah, though I still have no idea what she's doing!" Feleine tried to rush toward Saraynea, but Mynh grabbed her arm.

"Wait." Mynh said. Feleine stopped and stared at the monster. It seemed curious about what Saraynea was doing as well. It slowly began to perform similar movements. As they danced together, the black stains on the water began to shrink until the water became clear. The dance ended when Saraynea's final step led to a respectful bow before the creature, which bowed back before receding and the lake was still. With her job done, Saraynea walked back toward Feleine and Mynh.

"How did you know that would work?" Feleine asked.

"It was a cleansing dance used to help spirits."

"That was a spirit? I've never seen one before." Feleine said.

"I'm just concerned about what it said to me."

"It spoke? I didn't hear anything other than its roaring." Feleine said.

"Shy spirits prefer to talk with shamans or people who are generally close to them such as someone who leaves offerings at a shrine." Saraynea explained.

"I guess you were able to understand it more easily because of your connection to them as a shaman." Mynh said. "What did it tell you that makes you worried?"

"If I understood it correctly, and I really hope I didn't, it said that something or someone corrupted it on purpose. That's what the black sludge was all over it."

"How is that even possible?" Feleine asked.

"Well, sometimes spirits can become corrupted on their own, but shamans usually cleanse them right away. I don't understand why someone would corrupt them in the first place." Saraynea seemed upset for what happened to the water spirit.

"You fixed it though right? It'll be ok now?" Feleine asked tying to comfort Saraynea. She nodded and smiled, making Feleine feel better as well. The conversation was forced to come to an end when they all heard rustling leaves coming from all directions.

"Great..." Feleine muttered, already having an idea as to what it was. "Let's get this over with." Feleine growled. Saraynea was surprised to see Feleine eager for a fight. Deep within, Feleine felt the need to get back at the mysterious clan bears for the injury they had given to Saraynea.

"You're still alive. That's good." Venomclaw said as she and her team appeared through the trees. "We were informed of your little injury. This shouldn't take too long." Venomclaw dashed toward Saraynea, but suddenly stopped and backed away as an arrow flew right in front of her. "No!" she whispered as she stared at Mynh. "You're dead! I killed you!" she roared.

"If you killed me, I wouldn't be standing here, would I?" Mynh answered in her usual serious tone.

"I'll fill you with every poison I've ever created after I cut out your irritating tongue!" Venomclaw drew her blades. "Get the shaman!" she ordered. "But don't touch the hunter. She's mine!" she finished and rushed toward Mynh.

Three monks armed with staves approached Feleine and began to quickly strike at her. While she was able to block most of the attacks, there was never an opening for her to make an offensive move. A large warrior with a long blade walked up to Saraynea while Feleine was distracted.

"We both know that you're not in any condition to fight. So, just come with us. I'll see if my master will spare your friends if you do." He said as he stared down at her. While there was a constant pain deep in her stomach to remind her of her injury, she still managed to focus enough to form lightning in her paws though she could feel that there was not a lot of power in it. She slowly backed into a tree while the large warrior laughed. Without saying anything, he put all his strength in his knee and he struck her right in her stomach. Saraynea's knees immediately weakened, causing her to fall to them in agony. She choked on blood between her cries of pain.

"Sara!" Feleine called. She grabbed the two staves of the enemies to her sides and used them to keep her balance as she performed a backflip that delivered a powerful kick to the jaw of the one who stood in front of her. She then used her foot to kick down the staff of another bear, causing it to slightly sink into the ground while she drew back one paw. The power from her palm attack caused her target to fall back, allowing her to face her last enemy and perform another kick technique by balancing on one foot to spin, delivering a side kick and causing the last monk fighter to fall.

"Heh! You're not needed for our mission so I get to cut you right down here!" a warrior laughed with excitement. He raised his blade, but Feleine was able to catch the blade between her paws. Her heart pounded as she had never caught a blade before and knew it was a risky move. He pulled the blade to one side, causing Feleine to quickly step over, trying to follow the blade but the warrior twisted the blade before quickly pulling it from her grasp, causing the sword to cut her palms as she stood before Saraynea. "Now you're in my way..." the warrior raised his blade again to strike Feleine down for good. She backed up until her back was pressed up against Saraynea.

"Hototo!" Saraynea whispered by Feleine's ear.

"Huh?" Feleine questioned.

"I need your help!" Saraynea called out. Feleine turned her head, but quickly shut her eyes as a bright flash radiated from Saraynea. Before she opened her eyes, Feleine heard a loud clang followed by deep growling. She opened her eyes and gasped in fright. Before her stood a massive guardian lion; a creature she only heard of in stories.

The warrior froze when his gaze met that of the lion. The beast's glare pierced right through him, leaving him paralyzed. In the jaws of the lion was the warrior's blade. Putting more pressure on the bite, the lion's jaw shattered the blade. The great beast let out a loud vicious roar causing the warrior to quickly flee. The three monks had recovered and prepared to attack the lion. He easily bit down on one staff and flung it along with its wielder away. Rearing up allowed him to swipe with a massive paw to toss another out of the way, leaving the last one too afraid to attempt an attack after seeing how easily their allies were tossed away. The lion roared again while lunging toward the fighters, causing them to become afraid enough to flee. Venomclaw quickly struck at Mynh with her daggers, but Mynh was able to block the attacks using her bow. Suddenly she quickly backed away and turned to see what was going on.

"A spirit!" she said to herself before fleeing with the rest of her team. The lion took several steps toward them, roaring as they ran into the trees.

The lion turned around and approached Saraynea. He pressed his muzzle against her. His size was so massive that Saraynea was able to lean her entire body on his snout.

"Thank you, Hototo." She said weakly before her entire body twitched in pain. Hototo slowly lowered his head so that Saraynea could sit down.

"So that's Hototo." Feleine said still in awe at the mighty beast before her. She was surprised at how gentle he was toward Saraynea after being so aggressive toward the enemy.

"Saraynea, are you alright?" he softly said to her.

"Never thought I'd get to hear a spirit talk." Feleine said. Hototo looked toward her, his intimidating gaze made her body freeze.

"What are you called?" Hototo asked.

"Feleine." She answered.

"She's a friend." Saraynea said. "So is Mynh over there."

"I see. I'm sorry I have not been able to help you as much as I should be."

"Don't worry. I know you're dealing with problems in the spirit realm."

"I should have come sooner. I can sense that you are becoming weaker as time goes on." He affectionately licked her face, causing her to smile even though she was in pain. Seeing how the great lion so gently comforted Saraynea made Feleine feel less intimidated by him.

"I guess he's not a shy spirit if I can hear understand him." Feleine said.

"Hototo is a spirit of the guardian element. That's why he's so strong and definitely not shy." Saraynea explained.

"Does that mean he can stay with us and help fight again?" Mynh asked.

"If we really need him, I can help him travel from the spirit realm since he's my spirit partner, but he's busy helping some spirits in the spirit realm." Saraynea said.

"Having problems over there too, I guess?" Feleine asked.

"A lot of fearful and injured spirits have been showing up. I'm trying to help find out why. I should get back to the spirit realm and continue helping them." Hototo said, though he seemed sad about leaving Saraynea.

"It's ok. I understand." She replied.

"Just call to me if you need me." Hototo said and he started to glow with a bright light that forced Feleine and Mynh to shield their eyes.

"So, he's back in the spirit world?" Feleine asked.

"Yeah. Spirits use a lot of energy to stay in our realm", the red panda started and they began to walk again, "That's why shrines and offerings are so powerful and meaningful to them. Since he's my partner, I can help Hototo stay here by sharing my energy with him, but that works up a pretty big appetite and we're not exactly in a town where a lot of food is readily available." Saraynea said.

"We should probably move on then. I'm sure it won't be too long before those bears return." Mynh said.

"Hey, Mynh." Saraynea asked.

"Yeah?"

"One of those bears, the rogue actually, it seemed like you two knew each other. Do you have a history with her?" Saraynea asked.

"I guess you can say that. She tried to poison me a long time ago. It was

powerful and I became very sick. I kept my distance from that group while I healed. They're known as the Darkstorm Clan."

"Why did she target you in the first place?" Feleine asked.

"I don't like to get into the details."

"Oh ok." Saraynea was also disappointed that she would not talk about it. "I just have no idea why they want me now. I'd like to find out before they catch me for good."

"Sara, mind if I ask you something?" Mynh asked.

"Not at all."

"When did the problem in the spirit realm and your constant running from those bears start?" Mynh asked.

"I don't remember specifically if that's what you're asking, but it's been a few weeks."

"Did the two problems start at the same time?"

"Now that you mention it, yeah I guess they did. I've just been trying to solve my problem before I can help Hototo."

"You think they're related?" Feleine asked. Mynh's expression showed that she was trying to form a connection between Saraynea being hunted with the problems were occurring in the spirit realm.

"Well. There it is." Mynh said as the group stepped out of the forests edge where they were able to see a prairie before them. A small town was clearly visible and it was not much farther away.

"Finally! A town!" Feleine felt a lot of comfort seeing a town. As they approached it, more and more traveling caravans were seen heading toward and away along the dirt paths. Upon entering, the town seemed very busy for its small size. "I can't wait to find the inn and eat some real food! Maybe they have a bath house as well!"

"Don't we have to pay for all that?" Saraynea asked.

"Ah! That's right! All my money is back home." Feleine let out a long, disappointed sigh.

"I don't think I've ever had a coin in my pockets." Saraynea said.

"I have some extra money with me." Mynh added.

"Seriously? That's so kind of you, but I don't know how we can repay you." Feleine said.

"Consider it my thanks for your help in that fight."

"Our help? You were amazing against that rogue all by yourself!" Feleine said.

"Even together we struggled to deal with her and her team." Saraynea added.

"Eh, she has more attitude than fight in her." Mynh said as if she did not feel she deserved all the praise. "Besides, you took on three monks and a warrior." She said to Feleine.

"I guess. But Sara was the one who was able to summon a spirit that sent them all running like frightened cubs."

"Can't we just agree that we're all awesome?" Saraynea asked. Feleine and Mynh chuckled.

"Yeah, I like that solution." The hunter smiled.

The trio quickly bonded during their short time together as they made their way to the town. Upon arriving, Feleine and Saraynea immediately headed for the bath house while Mynh wanted to browse around town. Feleine quietly enjoyed the comforting warmth of the water. The only sound she heard was the gentle splashing and movement of the water when either she or Saraynea moved. She could not rid herself of the slight feeling of embarrassment as she had never shared a bath with another bear even though Saraynea kept her distance knowing how shy Feleine was.

"Hey." Saraynea quietly said to get Feleine's attention. "Do you want me to wash your back?"

"Uh, no I'm fine." Feleine quickly answered.

"Ok. Let me know if you change your mind." Saraynea said as she moved her long red hair over her shoulder and rested her head on her arms as she leaned over the edge of the tub.

"What about you?" Feleine asked, feeling bad about rejecting Saraynea's offer so quickly.

"Hm? My back? It still hurts from when we were attacked. I guess I fell harder than I thought."

Does she really not remember? Feleine thought. *I guess she lost consciousness before she slammed into the tree.*.. Feleine slowly moved toward Saraynea and gently placed a paw on her back. "Where does it hurt?"

"Right there actually. It's like a really bad bruise."

"Well, when that spell hit you, you did actually fly into a tree."

"Huh, I don't remember that at all."

"I was so concerned with your stomach that I never even bothered to check your back." Feleine said as she slowly moved her paw down Saraynea's back for any signs of injuries. Saraynea twitched from Feleine's touch. "Sorry! I guess you really got hurt there." Saraynea tried to hold back her gentle giggles, but a full laugh suddenly forced its way out of her throat. Feleine quickly backed off while Saraynea turned to face her.

"Sorry." Saraynea chuckled. Feleine felt relieved when she realized that Saraynea's reaction was not caused from pain but simply that she was ticklish.

The next day, Saraynea and Feleine decided to spend more time in the inn since it had been a while since they were able to appreciate the comfort and warm food. Mynh, who had trouble sitting in one place for too long, felt bored of the inn and decided to take a walk around town. She easily spotted the heavily cloaked clan bears through the crowd. They were talking to a group who, from shaking their heads, showed that the clan members were asking questions. She kept her distance, but made sure to not lose sight of them as she followed the duo. After turning a corner, she found the alley was empty.

"Mind if we ask you a question?" a voice said from right behind her. She turned and backed away, but was stopped when she bumped into the other member. "We're looking for someone and we'd appreciate it if you could tell us if you've seen or heard of a young female red panda, likely with a large wound on her stomach?"

"Can't say that I have." Mynh replied.

"Are you sure?" one said leaning close to her.

"That was a very specific description. It's a small town. I'm sure someone

who looked like that would stick out quite well."

"Alright then. Here's another question: If you know nothing, then why are you following us?" knowing they saw through her, Mynh reached for her bow and struck at the clan member in front of her with its sharp edge, allowing her to quickly move around him. She ran back to the inn as quickly as she could.

"Pack up! We have to go!" Mynh ordered as she pushed the door open.

"Already? What's going on?" Feleine asked.

"They're here and they're after us. We have to get out of here right now."

"And go where?" Saraynea asked.

"There's a chasm outside of town. We'll take the bridge across and destroy it."

"A bridge? Is there any other way?" Feleine asked, not liking the idea of crossing a bridge with her fear of heights.

"Unless you want to climb all the way down and back up, we have to cross that bridge. It's the only one nearby." When the group was prepared, they quickly made their way out of the town before the warriors would find them. By the time they made it to the bridge, they were out of breath. Feleine looked over the edge. All she saw looking down was a raging river that continued along the chasm.

"I really don't like this." Feleine said.

"Don't worry, it's not too far and the bridge looks sturdy. You'll be at the other side before you know it." Saraynea comforted.

"Don't tell me she's afraid of heights?" Mynh asked. "Ok, I'll go first just to make sure it's safe, then Feleine will follow so she can be done with it, then Saraynea you have to get across as quickly as possible. The group agreed on the plan just as they heard several voices from behind them. Mynh made her way across the bridge. At the other side, she kept her bow ready in case the clan soldiers caught up with them. Feleine walked along the wood planks more slowly than Mynh. A group of the Darkstorm clan bears were coming close to the bridge, causing Saraynea to rush up to Feleine. Saraynea's leg fell through a weak plank of wood. Feleine turned to help her.

"Just go!" Saraynea ordered as she tried to pull her leg up but the sharp

edges in the wood made it a painful experience. Feleine reluctantly turned again to meet up with Mynh on the other side when an arrow pierced into her calf, causing her to fall to her knees. Mynh had also begun to fire arrows at the enemy. An arrow cut through one of the side ropes, quickly causing the bridge to become less stable. With her leg still stuck, Saraynea influenced the wind to surround Feleine, lifting her up and forcing her over to Mynh. When another arrow cut through a rope, the bridge began to collapse as the ropes were not able to support the pressure. With her leg still stuck, she was unable to move as the bridge slammed against the wall of the chasm, causing it to break apart and sending her into the wild river below. She struggled to keep her head above the water as the force of the current pushed her around. She turned around in hopes of being able to grab onto a rock or the wall of the chasm, but she soon found herself at the top of a waterfall with nothing to hold onto or having any way to save herself. On the other side of the chasm, the clan bears began to follow the river, trying to find where Saraynea would have washed up.

"We have to go!" Feleine said as Mynh finished dressing her leg wound. "We have to hurry before they find her!"

"I know! But we have to stay focused! We can't rush into a fight with these guys."

"I don't care! I just want to know where this river ends!" Feleine said and she began to follow the river as well.

Venomclaw walked by herself in the camp. Her team members were obvious since they were much more exhausted than the others as they sat in groups talking to each other. She was also tired, but as a captain she tried to hide it and look busy, though there was one member who was not easily fooled.

"Back already?" Venomclaw sighed as she recognized the voice.

"Yes." Venomclaw quickly replied.

"Come now, dear, I'm just trying to start a friendly chat."

"I'm not interested Kheiryn. You should know that." Venomclaw turned to face the moon bear in her dark purple and blue robe. As a shadow priestess, Kheiryn had a strong bond dark magic, so strong that shadow energy emitted from her back which she kept in the form of black wings.

"I'm just surprised that you aren't still out there looking for Mynh."

"Which of my team members did you hear that from?"

"Oh, don't worry. None of them are talking about your meeting with her."

"Then how do you know?"

"I saw her with my own eyes." Kheiryn smiled while Venomclaw pulled back her lips into a snarl.

"I'd love to know why you follow me on my missions since you hate to fight and won't help anyway."

"I'm free to come and go as I please. After all, not too many herbs grow on this rocky mountain and I need a lot of them to provide enough potions to the clan."

"So pick flowers elsewhere! Why do you need to follow me? I'm hunting the target, not flowers!"

"Oh, but it's much more fun to follow you." Venomclaw glared into Kheiryn's teal eyes for a moment.

"Sometimes I wonder if you're truly loyal to the clan."

"Only sometimes? Seems like more often than that." Venomclaw rolled her eyes and walked away. "Well that's rude."

"Why waste my time? You never take anything seriously."

"He hasn't killed me yet so I must be doing something right."

"If I was the leader, you would've died a long time ago." After a pause with a slightly surprised expression, Kheiryn laughed.

"If you couldn't kill Mynh, what makes you think you could kill me?"

"If you're so great and powerful then why haven't you bothered the capture the shaman?"

"Because I was not assigned to the mission. I'm not a captain like you are. I'm just the clan alchemist. It's just more interesting than sitting here all the time."

"Fine." Venomclaw snapped. "You'll be plenty entertained when I finish off Mynh and capture the shaman!"

"Sounds entertaining indeed. I'll enjoy watching you try to accomplish

those goals." Kheiryn smiled.

## Part 4

Before she opened her eyes, Saraynea heard the sound of two female voices. Her eyelids felt heavy, but she was finally able to see the faces of the female red pandas.

"Hey! She's awake!" the younger said. "Wow she's still really out of it though."

"Be careful with her." The older warned. "She's probably really weak right now and likely confused." Saraynea glanced around and realized that she was lying in a bed. "Ayumei, can you grab one of my robes? Now that she's awake, we should get her cleaned up."

"I'll be right back! Don't ask any questions yet. I'm super curious about her too!" Ayumei said and she ran out of the room.

"That's my little sister, Ayumei. She's really sweet, but don't get on her bad side. She's a skilled mage for her young age! My name is Achamaru." She explained as she led Saraynea to the bathroom. "Alright, let's get you cleaned up." Without warning, Achamaru grabbed Saraynea's muddy shirt and pulled it off. "Looks like you've been having a hard time lately..." she said as she noticed the bandages on Saraynea's stomach. After quickly finishing removing Saraynea's clothes and letting down the part of hair she kept in a braid, she had Saraynea sit in the middle of the tub and began to wash her. Everything was happening so fast that she had not even said a word to either of the strangers. She was surprised when she found herself relaxing. Being the older sister, Achamaru must have had a lot of experience bathing her younger sister since her washing felt like a massage on Saraynea's tired muscles. Already feeling lost, confused, and unsure of what would happen next, she felt like a cub anyway and enjoyed the scrubbing. She sat completely still and did not even move her hair when it fell in front of her face.

"I'm back!" Ayumei cheered as she returned to the bathroom.

"That was fast." Achamaru replied.

"Wow that's some scar! How'd you get it? It looks recent."

"Ayumei! We just met her! Don't ask such personal questions." Achamaru

scolded her sister as she rinsed away the suds from Saraynea's fur.

"I'm so curious! We never see adventurers here!"

"I know but we found her by the river. It's not like she walked into town as a tourist. She'll need a lot of rest first and probably some food."

"I want to help!" it seemed like Ayumei's tone was uncontrollably excited.

"Good to know, and to start, where's the robe?" Ayumei quickly held out a light blue kimono. "A little big, but it looks good on you." Achamaru said. Since she was finally cleaned up, Saraynea was left in her room so she could have some time to settle in. She still had not said a word yet and did not bother to braid her hair again. Her mind was too full of thoughts constantly swirling around. She rested on her stomach on the bed and tried to sort out the thoughts. She was upset having been separated from Feleine and Mynh and wondered if they were safe or if they had been injured. She realized that she had left Feleine, who still needed to return to her own home. Even Mynh had decided to help her out even though she had nothing to give in return. Both of them worked hard to protect her and now she had no way of knowing where they were or even how to reunite with them. She wondered if finding them would even be a good idea. Since meeting Feleine, she had brought nothing but danger to her life. She tried to think if the separation was a good thing and maybe she should continue her journey alone after she regained her strength. Growing more uncertain, tears began to form in her eyes and she buried her face into the pillow.

"How are you doing?" Ayumei asked. Saraynea raised her head. She had not even heard Ayumei enter the room. "I brought you some food." She said and pointed her snout toward the side of the bed where she had placed a tray on a barrel for Saraynea. "Whenever I'm upset, I always talk to my sister. She's busy right now so, you can talk to me if you want." Saraynea felt bad, but she had no idea how she would even express her thoughts to Ayumei so she turned her head and rested her cheek against the pillow. "Sorry if I've been kind of pushy with you. You didn't have any supplies, but the average red panda doesn't exactly get washed up in a river. You seem like an adventurer and I'd love to talk to you about it. I've always wanted to go on an adventure." Saraynea was happy that Ayumei was doing all of the talking and did not ask her any direct questions. She kept eye contact with her, but only paid attention half of the time, the other half being used to wonder in her own thoughts.

Every time she refused to eat, the sisters become more worried about her health.

It seemed like all she could feel was sadness, even though she wanted it to go away. Ayumei spent most of her time talking to Saraynea and telling her stories like she had never spoken to another bear before. The more she spoke, the more Saraynea began to listen. It was her only distraction from her conflicting thoughts. Every day, Ayumei sat with Saraynea to share her stories and thoughts. Sometimes Achamaru would stand in the doorway and join the conversation as well. Saraynea began to feel like she understood the sisters so much, meanwhile they still knew nothing about her.

"And that was when I discovered I was a mage!" Ayumei explained. "It was so exciting! But, also kind of scary knowing I had so much power in me and not knowing how to fully control it. I wanted to make sure I didn't hurt anyone, especially Achamaru."

"Saraynea." She interrupted.

"Sorry, what?" Ayumei paused, surprised that Saraynea had finally spoken.

"My name. It's Saraynea, but my friends call me Sara. I was separated from them when we were attacked. It's my fault too. I was the only target, but since I was with them, I put them in danger too. I protected one of them and that's how I got the scar on my stomach. She's been through so much since we first met. I've been nothing but a burden. I wouldn't be surprised if they stopped looking for me."

"Why would they stop? Friends always look out for each other no matter what."

"I've brought them nothing but trouble. Why would they want me back?"

"You pushed your friend away from the attack that hurt your stomach, right? Isn't that the opposite of being a burden? You risked your life to save her. I'm sure she appreciates that."

Saraynea was surprised that the young mage's words gave her some hope. That night, she decided to leave the room and eat with the sisters. Achamaru was happy to see her starting to feel better since they found her while Ayumei excitedly listened to Saraynea's stories of how she would play with the spirits when she was a cub as well as when she met her spirit guardian, Hototo. When she returned to her room for the night, Saraynea felt happy about finally expressing her appreciation to the sisters. She also tightly held onto the hope of seeing Feleine and Mynh again since opening up to the sisters made her miss

them.

The next day was the first time Saraynea had stepped outside since she met the sisters. They had made their way to the center of the town which was very busy and full of groups of bears which reminded her of traveling with Mynh and Feleine. Her ears dropped for a moment as she hoped to find her friends, but they perked to the sound of Ayumei's voice, whose tone was either very excited or annoyed. Hearing the unhappy tone, Saraynea glanced toward Achamaru who had an expression of distaste. Saraynea turned her gaze toward the source to see a group who stared back with mocking faces.

"Hey there, Maru." One of the males greeted.

"Acha-maru." Achamaru sternly corrected.

"And how's the cub?" A female snickered as she approached Ayumei, who replied with an aggressive snarl which surprised both the female and Saraynea. "Not in a good mood today it seems."

"And what about this one? Haven't seen you around here before." Another said to Saraynea.

"She's a shaman, so you better not mess with her!" Ayumei snapped. "She'll trap you in an eternal prison of ice." She finished. Saraynea smiled in amusement since she had never thought to do such a thing to anyone before.

"If you really wanted to, couldn't you do that? You can control ice abilities."

"I'd rather push you through a portal to a random realm of monsters and horrors, but my sister says that's going a little too far." Ayumei grumbled.

"Can she really do that?" One of them whispered to another.

"The only reason I tell you to not to do that is because they're not worth your effort." Achamaru said to her sister.

"Even if you were to do that, we'd be fine! We've been training to fight monsters and horrors."

"Expecting to fight such creatures?" Achamaru asked.

"The next time that *thing* shows its face, we're going to slay it for sure."

"You mean that strange creature from the forest? You don't even know what it is." Achamaru said.

"We don't even know if it's a bad thing. It hasn't come near the town, so why bother it?" Ayumei questioned.

"What if it's a spirit?" Saraynea asked.

"A spirit? I've never seen one in my entire life in this town. Besides it's too ugly to be a good thing. It's probably just a monster."

"You shouldn't mess with it if you don't know what it is." Saraynea growled at the group.

"If you're a shaman, then shouldn't know if there are spirits around or not?" the female of the group asked.

"I can try to find out for sure. Would you mind leaving it alone if it shows up again?" Saraynea asked.

"Like we said before, the next time we see it, we're going to fight it. Don't get in our way!" One of the males said as they began to walk away.

"Guess we'll just have to beat them to it." Saraynea glared at them for a moment before turning to Achamaru and Ayumei. "Can you tell me more about the creature?"

"A few weeks ago, it started to show up sometimes near the edge of the forest." Achamaru started. "No one has gone near it yet since so far it has left us alone too. We catch glimpses of it sometimes. Its head can be seen above the trees and sometimes it lets out a loud howl."

"It's kind of scary, but also sad. I don't like the idea of those jerks looking for it." Ayumei said.

"Me too. Let's just hope they don't find it and make it mad." Achamaru said and they continued their day.

Saraynea's heart raced when she awoke. She could still hear the cry that woke her ringing in her ears. She got out of the bed and approached the window, from which she was able to see the forest. Without a word, the sisters rushed into the room and looked out the window as well.

"That was really loud!" Ayumei's voice shook with fear.

"What was that?" Saraynea asked, trying to hide her own fear.

"That was the creature. It came back tonight, but I've never heard it sound

like that." Achamaru replied. Saraynea was impressed that she seemed more concerned than afraid. They continued to stare out at the forest without speaking until they each gasped at the sight of the creature's head as it looked up to the sky and cried out again. This time, Saraynea heard a voice along with the roar.

"Why is it so mad tonight? What do we do?" Ayumei asked as she held onto her sister with her claws.

"It's not mad." Saraynea said causing the sisters to look at her while she continued to stare at the creature as its head lowered below the trees. "It's in pain. It's crying out for help."

"How do you know that?" Achamaru asked.

"It's a spirit." Saraynea said as she turned toward them. "I have to find out what's wrong."

"You're going out there!?" Ayumei asked with both fear and amazement.

"I'm a shaman. The spirits answer when I call out, so I must do the same for them."

"Wait." Achamaru said. "Just give me a moment to get my armor."

"I don't want to be left here alone, so count me in too!" Ayumei cheered with newfound confidence.

The closer they made it to the edge of the forest, the more they seemed to slow down out of the fear they refused to admit.

"What are those!?" Ayumei cried out, causing Achamaru to raise her sword and shield as the small shadows moved toward them.

"Run!"

"It's gonna eat us!"

"We may have made it a little mad." The group they had run into in the town rushed passed them as quickly as their feet could carry them.

"Well that was a lot less frightening than I thought it would be." Achamaru sighed with relief. The ground shook to the steps of the creature as it appeared through the trees. Though it was dark, they could still see the basic build of the spirit: it was thin with long limbs, and long sharp claws. It growled before walking toward where the others had run.

"Wait!" Saraynea called out, but the spirit ignored her. When they moved further from the forest, the moonlight hit the spirit, revealing several black corruptions clinging to it. She raised her paws, causing a wall of earth to rise before the spirit's knees. It paused and slowly turned to look down at Saraynea. "Listen to me! You have to fight the corruption! I can help you, but you have to try to fight it!" she called out to it. The spirit stared at her for a moment before revealing its fangs and raising its claws to swat Saraynea away. It turned back toward the town when several frost attacks struck it, causing the impact areas to freeze, but with a quick flex of its muscles, the spirit was able to shatter the ice on its body before turning around and staring at the sisters.

"Now, go! Find her and make sure she's ok." Achamaru said and Ayumei ran toward where Saraynea was thrown. The spirit snarled as its gaze glanced between the sisters, unsure of which was the one to attack it. When it seemed to focus more on Ayumei, Achamaru let out the loudest roar she could causing the spirit to focus on her instead. Ayumei stopped and turned when she heard her sister scream. When the spirit turned, Ayumei could see Achamaru trapped in the tight grip of the spirit's fist. Without a delay, she ran back toward the spirit.

"Let my sister go!" She yelled as she launched several balls of fire at the spirit which roared back in anger at her, though it seemed her attacks did not do much to hurt it. When it extended its arm toward her, she focused on its wrist and instantly teleported to it, using her claws to hold on as she focused on its upper arm, teleporting again, but the skill of teleporting took a lot of energy and she was only able to travel short distances which forced her to use the skill more often. When she finally had a grip on the fist that held Achamaru, she was sweating and dizzy.

"Ayumei, you have to be careful!" Achamaru said through her pain. "You'll pass out!"

"Just because I'm younger doesn't mean I don't have to look out for you too." Ayumei weakly replied through her heavy breathing. The spirit jerked, causing Ayumei to lose her footing. Achamaru reached and tightly grabbed Ayumei's wrist.

"Hold on!" Achamaru ordered as the fright of losing her sister forced her to forget about her own situation.

"I'm trying!" Ayumei replied, but Achamaru knew she was struggling and grabbed her wrist with both paws. The hand moved again, making holding her

sister even more difficult. The new angle allowed her to see Saraynea below them, slowly dancing before the spirit. At first, she was confused, but a glance at the spirit's intrigued expression showed that she had a plan. A black pattern on the side of the spirit's face began to shrink. She looked back down as she felt Ayumei's paw slipping from her grasp.

"Ayumei!" She cried out, but the spirit's other hand moved to catch Ayumei before the one that held Achamaru loosened its grip as it knelt down. Achamaru rushed to her sister and helped her lean up in her arms. "Are you ok?" she asked. Ayumei opened her eyes and smiled and nodded, though she was still clearly weak. "It's amazing that you're able to use the teleporting skill so young, but even the best mages have to practice powerful magic before they can fully use such skills." She said as she pressed her muzzle into Ayumei's. The spirit's body shimmered in the moonlight when all the corruption markings were gone. It bowed its head to Saraynea before looking down at its palm where the sisters sat.

"Are you two ok?" Saraynea quickly asked.

"Yeah, we'll be fine. What did you do?" Achamaru asked as she looked up at the spirit.

"A cleansing dance. She was in pain because of those corruption marks on her body. It'll be ok now though. You don't have to be afraid of her." Saraynea explained. Ayumei stood and looked up.

"I'm sorry I attacked you. I was scared when you were hurting my sister. I guess you were scared too and that's why you attacked us."

"I doubt being teased by those hooligans helped." Achamaru added. The spirit let out a hissing sound.

"She said you're very brave and she's thankful for our help." Saraynea said. "I don't think those guys would dare to come near the spirit again after they ran away like that." The spirit seemed to smile as she nodded. Saraynea, Achamaru, and Ayumei silently watched the spirit walk back into the forest.

Saraynea was with the sisters in the town just to get out of the house for a while. She had become quiet again as she began to think about Feleine and Mynh after cleansing the spirit like she had done when she was with them. Remembering them made her miss them even more. She stared out at the crowd looking at all the bears. None of them walked alone. Each was accompanied by a friend. Even though she had found friendship in the sisters, she could not help

but feel lonely deep inside. She noticed a black-furred and a silver-furred panda standing still as the crowds moved around them.

"Sara? Is that you?" Feleine asked as she approached with Mynh. Saraynea raised her paw and waved at them. "Finally!" Feleine cheered as she lunged into Saraynea and wrapped her arms around her. "We've been looking all over for you!"

"Really?" Saraynea asked.

"Of course. We've been searching since you got separated from us."

"She refused to rest even with her leg injury from that arrow." Mynh said. Saraynea stared at Feleine.

"What? I didn't expect you to seem...confused." Feleine said with her own confused expression.

"It's just that I wasn't even sure if you were looking for me, so to hear that you were working that hard... I'm a little surprised." Saraynea explained.

"Surprised that we were looking? Of course we were looking for you! I was so scared after a while that something had happened to you."

"She was really scared all right. Perhaps even cried a few times." Feleine turned and glared at Mynh for her comment but Mynh had a satisfied smile on her face for not only embarrassing Feleine, but better hinting to Saraynea how much they cared for her since Feleine struggled to express herself.

"I told you your friends were looking for you!" Ayumei chimed in.

"Ayumei! They're trying to talk to each other! Stay out of it for a moment." Achamaru scolded. Feleine and Mynh curiously stared at them.

"This is Ayumei and Achamaru. They found me and have been looking after me since we were separated." Saraynea said.

"Thanks so much for looking after her for us." Feleine said to the sisters.

"Don't even worry about it." Achamaru said.

"She saved a corrupted spirit, so it's a really good thing she ended up here for a while." Ayumei added.

"Another corrupted spirit?" Feleine turned to Saraynea who nodded.

"Seems like this is more serious than we thought." Mynh said. "Thankfully it looks like we found her before the clan bears, but we probably shouldn't stick around for long."

"Right. I'd hate for them to cause trouble here." Saraynea agreed.

Saraynea joined Feleine and Mynh in the town inn. When the sky was dark and Mynh was already in her room, Saraynea and Feleine prepared to go to sleep in the room that they were going to stay in.

"You said you wanted to talk to me?" she greeted Feleine who stared out the window at the stars.

"Yeah. I'm not very good at talking but, I guess I'll do my best."

"You can always talk to me about anything Feleine." Saraynea said as she stood by the window as well.

"The first time we ran from those clan bears together, I told you I'd stay with you to protect you."

"I remember that."

"Yeah, well, clearly I'm not doing a very good job at it." Feleine was obviously feeling stressed.

"I wouldn't say that. You saved my life twice: when we first met and when you took care of me when I was injured."

"You saved me three times: when we fell off a mountain, when I couldn't get out of the way of that arcane blast, and you made sure I made it off of that bridge. Two of those times were self-sacrifices and in those times I was more scared than ever before in my life. I honestly didn't think you'd survive that blast and when you fell to that river, I thought I might never see you again."

"It was my decision to do those things. I didn't want to see you get hurt."

"I don't want to see you get hurt either! So, I'm going to try harder from now on. I'll be a better protector to you."

"I'm still going to do whatever I can to keep you safe as well."

"The idea is that you take a step back so you stop getting lost and injured." Saraynea softly laughed at Feleine's comment.

"You think what I'm doing is so crazy, but you're my best friend." Saraynea

hugged Feleine. "And friends look out for each other no matter what."

## Part 5

The next morning, Feleine woke to the smell of food and rolled over to see Saraynea and Mynh eating from a container containing a breakfast meal.

"Mynh brought breakfast!" Saraynea said as she chewed. "She brought up a box for you too."

"Oh, thanks Mynh." Feleine said as she got out of her bed and accepted the box that Saraynea handed to her. She held it for a moment as she stared at Saraynea. She put the box down on the desk and reached to run her claws through Saraynea's red hair. Without speaking, Feleine sat behind Saraynea on the bed and used her claws to make a horizontal separation of her hair, braiding the upper half. When she finished, Saraynea turned to look at her with a smile on her face.

"Thanks." She said. Feleine smiled back and grabbed her breakfast and began to eat with them. When they had finished, they left the inn to head back toward the forest when Saraynea stopped and stared in the direction of the home of the sisters.

"You ok?" Mynh asked.

"Yeah. It's just that I'm going to miss Achamaru and Ayumei. They took really good care of me over the last few days."

"I wouldn't mind if you wanted to go by there to say good-bye to them." Mynh said.

"Thanks. I'd really like to properly thank them." Saraynea said. When they took a few steps away from the inn, Achamaru and Ayumei were running up to them.

"Glad we made it in time!" Achamaru greeted.

"I was about to go see you two! I really wanted to thank you for all you did for me. Are you heading out of town as well?" Saraynea asked, noticing that Achamaru was dressed in her armor.

"We're coming with you!" Ayumei cheered.

"If that's alright with you." Achamaru added. "It's been a while since we

went anywhere, so we were wondering if we could tag along with you for a while."

"That'd be great, but we honestly don't really know where we're going. We're trying to get back to Feleine's home, but we haven't been able to figure out where we are from there and so we have no idea how to get back." Saraynea explained.

"There's a large town through the forest!" Ayumei cheered. "A lot of adventurers pass through there. I'm sure someone there will be able to help."

"We'll guide you there." Achamaru said.

"I wouldn't mind a larger group." Mynh said and Feleine nodded as well.

"I guess you two are a part of the team then." Saraynea smiled.

"I'm tired!" Ayumei whined.

"Number one thing you deal with when traveling: walking." Achamaru said.

"Well, yeah I knew that! But it's been hours and we haven't stopped at all!"

"I guess we can stop for a while." Saraynea suggested.

"This isn't a bad spot to set up camp." Mynh added.

"I think we should keep going. We're trying to get to a large town that could be really useful to us. The more we slow down and stop, the longer it'll take to get there." Feleine argued.

"I guess you just have more energy than us." Saraynea said as she sat on a log with Ayumei. "Then let's vote. Who wants to rest?"

"Me!" Ayumei shouted.

"I have to stick with my sister." Achamaru said.

"I don't care either way." Mynh shrugged.

"Ok so that's two votes to rest, one to keep going, and one neutral. Sara?" Feleine asked. Saraynea giggled and shrugged. "Really!? Fine, we'll stay here until tomorrow morning." Feleine grumbled. Saraynea and Achamaru exchanged surprised glances in response to Feleine's grouchiness.

"Come on, Feleine, you've got to lighten up." Achamaru said as she stood

behind Feleine and used her arms to keep Feleine's up.

"Yeah we have to relax and have fun sometimes." Saraynea said as she began to claw at Feleine's exposed underarms.

"Stop it!" Feleine cried. "No fair! Let me go!" she begged while trying to pull her arms down, but Achamaru's arms were much stronger than they looked.

"Looks like fun, but I'm exhausted." Ayumei said.

"If there's going to be any tickling, I'll do my best to avoid getting involved." Mynh replied as she joined Ayumei on the log. While the others sat, Mynh explored the area a little to make sure that they were safe. She returned to share that she found a pond and everyone agreed that they should take the opportunity to clean their fur and relax.

"I'm surprised Feleine won't join us." Achamaru said as she enjoyed the warm water thanks to Saraynea and Ayumei using their fire abilities to warm the water.

"Yeah it feels so good!" Ayumei agreed.

"Me too especially since she loves a hot bath." Saraynea said.

"I hope she's not mad about before." Achamaru asked.

"I doubt it. She looks grumpier than she actually is. She's just really shy." Saraynea said. Feleine hid behind a nearby tree, listening to the group talk. She thought about asking to join, but her feet felt frozen to the ground. When the sky was dark and the stars shined, everyone picked a comfortable spot around camp to sleep for the night. Ayumei and Achamaru stayed close together while Mynh found a comfortable branch to keep watch over the camp for a while.

"Mind if I sleep here?" Saraynea asked Feleine who leaned against a tree.

"There's plenty of room." Feleine replied, but did not expect Saraynea to sit right next to her and nuzzle into her shoulder however she did not mind the company and appreciated the extra warmth from her fur as she fell asleep.

"I'm bored..."

"Honestly Ayumei! You're the one who wanted to come along." Achamaru complained back.

"We haven't seen anything interesting for a while! Nothing but trees! I've

seen enough trees!" Ayumei whined.

"Well, luckily for you, no more trees." Mynh said as the group stepped out of the border of the forest. Before them was a massive prairie.

"And there it is. Ox Plains. That's a tough town...even I haven't been there in a while." Achamaru said. As soon as the group entered the town they saw several tough looking bears, most covered in recent wounds yet they seemed like they wanted to get into more fights. In every shadow a small group would be playing games with dice and money as well as performing in physical games like arm wrestling in the middle of a circle of viewers who placed bets. "Ok, everyone, we have to be really careful around here. Avoid eye contact, don't get in anyone's way, and stick together." Achamaru explained.

"I think that warning was a bit too late..." Ayumei said as she pointed to Saraynea who had approached two large males sitting on barrels at a table in an alley.

"Hi!" Saraynea greeted. The two males glanced at each other and smiled.

"What can we do for you, pretty young lady?" one asked.

"Where's the nearest inn? My friends and I have been traveling for a while now and could use a rest."

"Depends on what you're looking for."

"There are many characters that like to gather at different inns."

"If you're looking for some action, you need to visit The Raging Ox. There's an arena in the middle so you can watch a good fight while having your drink."

"Oh. Is there anywhere a little quieter than that?" she asked.

"Lady, this is Ox Plains! Home to powerful fighters who trample their enemies! There is no such thing as a quiet place here." One said as he stood up and pounded his chest with a fist.

"Sit down!" the other ordered. "You can't hope to intimidate a girl after you had your tail handed to you by one."

"What!?"

"Just 'cause your black eye healed doesn't mean I've forgotten."

"That's different! She's the strongest warrior to ever live! I'd like to see how you'd do against her."

"The best fighter knows when to lie down and play dead so he can live another day."

"You're just too afraid to fight her."

"The strongest warrior ever?" Saraynea questioned.

"They call her the Bladed Dragon. She spends a lot of time in this town... usually beating everyone up."

"She hasn't lost a duel yet! Head to The Raging Ox if you want to see her in action. If you're lucky, you'll see an awesome fight or two!"

"How'd she become that strong?" Saraynea asked.

"Not only is she the best fighter, but she's an amazing explorer. She has so many stories of her adventures with her storm dragon."

"She tamed a dragon?" Saraynea asked in amazement.

"See? You can't talk about her without expressing her awesomeness!"

"I might see if I can visit her. Thanks for all the advice." Saraynea said and she returned to her friends. "Well they were nice and helpful." She said.

"I don't know if you're brave or crazy! You're lucky they didn't pick a fight with you!" Achamaru said.

"Well, they told me something interesting! If you've been here before, have you seen the Bladed Dragon?"

"I've never met her personally, but I've heard stories about her beating others up, usually fighters twice her size."

"We should try to see her if we're here!" Saraynea suggested.

"I don't know. She has a lot of fans, but she sure likes her space." Ayumei said.

"I wouldn't mind seeing what she's all about." Mynh seemed just as curious as Saraynea.

The Raging Ox was packed with cheering bears as they viewed the aggressive duel occurring in the middle of the building. Inside the duel ring, a massive

muscular fighter was challenging a female who wielded two blades. At first Saraynea and her friends were shocked at how aggressive the fight was inside of a building, yet it seemed so controlled inside the ring.

"Which one is the Bladed Dragon...?" Saraynea asked, glancing around the room.

"The brown-fur in the ring with the twin swords." Achamaru answered.

"Wow..." Saraynea said to herself in a low voice as she watched the warrior land a powerful strike with both her blades, sending her opponent fleeing from the ring.

"All right! I hope it scars so I can say I got it from the Bladed Dragon!" he cheered and he left the inn with a large smile on his face as if he achieved a victory. The winner put her blades away at her waist and made her way to a table in the back corner of the inn and sat down with her feet on the top of the table. She grabbed a large mug and drank from it. Next to the table, a large blue dragon was lying down, confirming that she was the exact warrior that Saraynea was seeking. All the bears who were viewing the fight sat down and talked to their friends about the fight they had just seen. Saraynea was surprised when no one approached her table when she had so many fans. Not wanting to lose the opportunity, she approached the table and slowly sat at the seat across from the warrior.

"Sorry kid, you'll have to wait. I need a break between fights." She said.

"I'm not here to fight you. I just want to talk to you." Saraynea greeted.

"You and everyone else. What makes you different?"

"I'm just interested since I've never heard of you before." The warrior took a moment to really look at Saraynea.

"You're not at all from around here."

"No and actually, I've heard that you're a very experienced traveler so I hoped I'd be able to get some guidance from you." The warrior put down her mug and put her feet to the floor.

"You get one question." She said as she stared into Saraynea's eyes.

"I'm trying to get my friend back to her home. It was located on the side of a mountain. It was really pretty." Saraynea began to struggle to remember the name of Feleine's hometown.

"The Blossoming Hillside." The warrior said.

"Yeah that's it!" Saraynea replied. The warrior slowly turned around a pulled a large map from one of the several supplies packs tied to the saddle on the dragon.

"You're here." She said pointing to the map. "You're looking to go here." Saraynea was surprised at how far away the warrior had moved her claw before stopping where The Blossoming Hillside was located.

"That's much further away than I thought."

"If everything was close together there'd be no adventure involved. Anyway, I answered your question." The warrior leaned back in her chair and put her feet on the table again. Saraynea did not move as she was thinking about the best way to get back to the mountain since the forest carried many memories of being attacked by the Darkstorm Clan and she feared running into them again if she went back that way.

"Is there another way than through the forest?" she asked. The warrior took a long drink from her mug before staring at Saraynea for a moment. Before she could even say anything, a heavily armored fighter slammed his fist on the table.

"If you're done with your little chat, I challenge you to a fight!" He demanded.

"I'm done with the chat, but I'm not done with my drink." The brown-fur replied. As she lifted her mug again, the challenger slapped the mug from her paw, causing what was left of her drink to spill on the table.

"I've been waiting for hours just to fight-"his statement was cut off when the Bladed Dragon drew a blade and cut off half his beard. Saraynea shared his surprised expression at how quickly the warrior moved.

"You want a beating that badly? Get in the ring!" she ordered. Saraynea did not blame her for being angry, but she realized just how much the Bladed Dragon liked her drinks.

After chasing away the challenger like she did to all the others, the Bladed Dragon returned to her table, still enraged.

"I guess we'll be leaving soon." she muttered to her dragon. Sensing that

someone was behind her, she turned and saw Saraynea placing two full mugs down. "I guess we can stay just a little longer."

"I have more questions, if you don't mind." Saraynea said pushing a mug toward the warrior, but keeping her paw on the top. The warrior glanced from the mug to Saraynea, deciding if she really wanted to stay.

"Ok, kid, what else do you want?" She said and Saraynea let go of the mug.

"Is there another way to the Blossoming Hillside other than going through the forest?"

"Yes, but you wouldn't want to go that way."

"I'm trying pretty hard to avoid the forest."

"The only way around the forest is through a mountain, but it's a long way up and it gets really cold and dangerous up there."

"So you've been through that way?"

"Of course." She answered and pushed her empty cup to Saraynea.

"Mind if I ask your name?"

"You could have saved some coin on this one. You can't walk into this town and not hear my name."

"I know what everyone likes to call you, but what do *you* like to be called?" the warrior stopped drinking and stared at Saraynea.

"Korramaru." She answered after a long pause.

"Ok, Korramaru. Would you guide us through the mountain pass?" Korramaru immediately put her mug down and stared at Saraynea with a confused expression.

"You want me to escort you? Look, I travel alone."

"Please! You've been through there before."

"I only had to look out for myself and my dragon. I've never had to watch someone's tail for them."

"Well, I have other friends that would be there with us."

"If you already have a group then why do you need me?"

"Because I'm being hunted and I don't want them to get hurt because of me."

"Hunted? By what?"

"A clan that's been chasing after me for a while. If the mountain is that dangerous, they may not follow me there. I might finally lose them."

"I'll think about it." Korramaru said.

"Thank you! I really appreciate it."

"Hey, I said I'll think about it. I haven't said yes yet."

Korramaru returned to her room at the inn as soon as the arena began to empty for the night. With no more duels, she would not make any more money for the day. She stood in front of her bed for a moment. "I have no patience for stalkers." She said as she turned and saw a shadowy figure emerge from the dark corner.

"I am just a messenger."

"Then what's your message? I've had a busy day."

"I am a member of a powerful clan. My masters know of your skill as a warrior as well as adventurer. We would like to offer you an invitation to our clan."

"Not interested. I do things alone."

"I see. In that case, we have a job offering instead. We're searching for a female red panda. She would have a serious wound to her stomach."

"I talk to a lot of fans every single day. You expect me to remember the details about each one?"

"Ah, but you spent a little more time than usual with one in particular. I think you'll remember quite well the only one who bought you a few drinks." Korramaru realized that he was referring to Saraynea. "We would like to capture our target, but this is a crowded town. If you can help us collect her more quietly, we will reward you."

"What do you want with her exactly?"

"You're very reluctant. Why would you care so much if something happened to her? You wouldn't want anything to happen to your dragon would you?"

"Touch Stormfang and I'll feed your corpse to him."

"If you change your mind, bring the girl to our camp in the forest. Two of my captains will be waiting there."

The next morning Korramaru eagerly made her way through the town toward the forest. She stopped when she heard a familiar voice call out to her. Saraynea and Feleine quickly approached her.

"Sorry to bother you like this, but you're not dueling..." Saraynea began.

"Sorry kid, not now. I have something I need to do as quickly as possible."

"Is everything ok?"

"Someone stole my dragon last night."

"That's horrible!"

"Someone stole a dragon?" Feleine was surprised that anyone would be able to steal such a beast.

"I was visited by a guest last night who threatened him unless I agreed to his conditions. When he left I checked around the stables where I left him and he wasn't there. I wasn't able to sleep, but that forest is a dangerous place at night. I'm going after him now."

"We can help if you want." Saraynea offered.

"I told you already. I work alone."

"Just because you choose to doesn't mean that you *have* to."Feleine said knowing how Korramaru felt since she once felt the same way.

"Trust me, you'd be safer here." Korramaru remembered that Saraynea was the target that the messenger wanted.

"Don't forget Sara, she had a strong reputation. You're still recovering." Feleine said.

"Your friend's right. I can handle whatever took Stormfang." Korramaru

said and she ran toward the forest. She was able to hear growling sounds and voices which she used to guide her to two clan bears.

"So you decided to come. Thanks for not killing our messenger." Arcantis greeted.

"I don't see your trade offer though. We're not giving him back without her." Venomclaw said as she stood near the tied up dragon.

"I didn't come here to trade with you scum. I came here for Stormfang. But first I think I'll remove your heads from your shoulders." Korramaru drew her blades and began to attack Venomclaw who used her own two daggers to deflect the strikes. Their blades continued to clang and their striking speed was unaffected as they spoke during their fight.

"Let's see how well you live up to your reputation." Venomclaw snickered.

"From the way you fight, I don't even need to go all out on you. If I were to use my full strength right now, you wouldn't even survive long enough to enjoy seeing my skills." Korramaru retorted, causing Venomclaw to growl. Her ears perked and she dodged to gain some space between herself and her two opponents. Right where she stood, black magic chains had punctured the ground. Arcantis pulled the chains back to his paw.

"If you'd like, we can give you another chance to fetch the girl for us and we'll keep our end of the deal and let your dragon go." Venomclaw said.

"You think I feel intimidated by you? I'm not even too concerned about my dragon right now, seeing that you tied him up with ropes. Clearly you've never dealt with such a beast before."

"We made sure we tied him up good and tight." Arcantis' tone was full of confidence, but his expression changed when he and Venomclaw turned toward Stormfang who was wildly trying to break his binds. A rope snapped, followed by another and another until he was able to shake off the remaining ones. Without delay, he charged into Venomclaw. She tried to stab with her blade, but she could not puncture his scales and was forced to the ground after he slammed her into a tree. Arcantis sent several magic blasts at the dragon, but the impacts did not even leave markings on his hide. As Stormfang rushed toward him, Arcantis summoned magic chains from both his paws, wrapping them around the beast's massive body. Stormfang opened his jaw and formed a large electrical cloud in his mouth, but black tendrils suddenly wrapped around his muzzle,

forcing it shut, however the attack was still able to exit through his nostrils and Arcantis was knocked back from the force while his chains broke. Korramaru's eyes followed along the tendrils to their source: Kheiryn sat on a branch in a nearby tree.

"So you're the Bladed Dragon? You are quite strong then, aren't you?" the moon bear greeted.

"I don't know who you are, but you're threatening my dragon, so why don't you get down here and fight me too?" Korramaru yelled.

"Oh my, you're a grumpy one aren't you? Just like Venomclaw." Kheiryn giggled.

"Did you come to help or chat, Kheiryn?" Arcantis asked as he stood before Korramaru.

"I came to be entertained. Camp was getting boring again and I knew I'd find something interesting by following you." She replied.

"You have a good grip on that dragon?" the rogue asked.

"If I didn't you two would be dead already."

"Just don't let go of it then. When we finish off this warrior, we'll search for the girl."

"Don't even worry your mind about her. You won't be able to finish me off." Korramaru said and she charged at Arcantis, who did not move or make any attempt to dodge her attack. When she slashed her blades through him, his figure faded right in front of her. *It was a magic illusion!* She realized and magic chains wrapped around her paws and feet, forcing her paws and knees to the ground. She struggled but suddenly stopped and shrieked when a deep pain rushed into her shoulder.

"Seems like the scales have tipped in our favor. You're so quick to attack that you easily fall for simple tricks." Venomclaw said as she pulled her dagger from Korramaru's shoulder. She raised her blade again when a gust of wind rushed passed them, forcing Venomclaw to shield her eyes. When she opened them, she swiftly rolled and dodged several jolts of electricity.

"Looks like we have another guest." Kheiryn said as Saraynea stood before them in a battle-ready stance as her lightning energy danced around her paws. "I don't know why you came out here, but it was a stupid decision!" Venomclaw yelled, but after taking a step toward her, her ears perked and she leaned back, barely avoiding an arrow that left a scrape across her snout. She snarled and turned to see Mynh who already had another arrow ready at her bow. Arcantis also stared, making him vulnerable when Feleine ran behind him and leapt to kick the back of his head, shattering the chains around Korramaru.

"Why are you here? You're in danger!" Korramaru warned as she stood and held her wound with a paw as her injured arm hung limp.

"You're not doing well yourself, so why don't you just let us help?" Saraynea said.

"So we meet again Mynh." Venomclaw smirked, but Mynh did not reply. "You always were quiet. Your seriousness and focus are what made you such a valuable member." She teased, causing Mynh to release her arrow which Venomclaw was prepared to dodge.

"Member?" Feleine questioned and a shadow appeared in front of her. She turned and punched a distorted image of Arcantis before chains wrapped around her paws as well as appearing around Korramaru, causing her to cry out when her wound was squeezed by the pressure.

"Can we finish this up? I'm going have a serious migraine later..." Arcantis whined as he rubbed his head where he had been kicked.

"Looks like your friends aren't proving to be very reliable, Mynh. Why don't you stop playing around and go back to doing some real work?"

"What are you talking about?" Mynh asked.

"You understand perfectly clear I'm sure. Is it, perhaps that you don't want your little friends to know about your past?"

"Shut up!" Mynh roared, but before she could prepare her next arrow, she too became a victim of Arcantis' chains.

"If you keep that up, your chains will begin to weaken." Kheiryn called from her tree.

"Why do you think I want to finish this already!?" he roared back. "Stop messing around and grab the shaman!"

"Fine." Venomclaw said and she charged at Saraynea who quickly dodged

the dagger strikes while trying to swipe with her storm paws. Venomclaw swiftly moved and landed a blow with her knee to Saraynea's stomach, causing the others to violently try to break from the chains. "Before we take our leave, would you like to know a secret?" she said as she knelt down to Saraynea, who was unable to respond through her pain. Venomclaw walked up to Mynh and smiled. "So, you never told them did you?"

"It doesn't matter. They don't need to know." Mynh replied quietly.

"How could you keep something so important from them? I thought you were friends, but you're keeping secrets? I think they should know that you were once one of us."

"What?" Feleine questioned.

"One of...them?" Saraynea said as she tried to lean up. "What is she talking about?"

"It's the truth. Mynh here was once a member of our clan. A high ranking one actually."

"I became tired of being told what to do without even knowing his real intentions. I see you're not though."

"Watch your tongue." Venomclaw placed a blade against Mynh's neck. "You're the one who's tied up."

"Don't try to sound like you have so much power. If not for Kheiryn, you would lose this fight in only a moment."

"Kheiryn? What does she have to do with anything?" Venomclaw snorted.

"If she were to let go of the dragon, you'd be forced to run back to your mountain with another failure to your name."

"She chose to come here on her own. She is not a part of my squad. She acted on her own and decided to hold the dragon. I never asked for her help." Venomclaw finished. Saraynea looked up at Kheiryn who stared down at her cold-hearted ally. She was surprised when Kheiryn looked down at her and stared for a few moments. Then it seemed like the tendrils coming from her back relaxed and Stormfang freed himself before letting out a raging roar. Feleine pulled on the chains and they snapped and faded, allowing her to rush toward Saraynea while Arcantis and Venomclaw were distracted by the enraged dragon.

With his focus shifted, Arcantis' chains broke, allowing his victims to stand.

"Get us out of here!" Venomclaw ordered.

"I only have enough energy to open the portal for a short time, so get ready!" Arcantis replied and he opened a portal that closed as soon as he and Venomclaw walked through. Stormfang made a purring sound as he nuzzled Korramaru who was hugging him back.

"Are you ok?" Feleine said as she helped Saraynea to her feet.

"Yeah, she didn't hit me too hard." Saraynea replied. Feleine lifted Saraynea's shirt so she could see the bandages around her stomach. Feleine sighed as she stared into Saraynea's eyes after seeing that the bandages had absorbed some blood. Mynh had quietly stood up and began to walk away.

"Where're you going Mynh?" Saraynea asked.

"You heard her." She answered without turning around. "I was one of them. I was once a member of the clan that is currently hunting you down. I'd be amazed if you still want me around."

"Mynh..." Saraynea gently placed her paw on her shoulder. "I do still want you around." Mynh looked over her shoulder. "I don't care what you used to be because you're not one of them anymore and you stood your ground against them. I'd like it if you continued to travel with us."

"Are you serious?" Mynh glanced at Feleine who smiled and nodded.

"I thought you'd hate me for that. I still hate me for being a part of that twisted group."

"Well, if they want you back with them and instead you're staying with us, isn't that the biggest insult to them? That has to make you feel a little better." Mynh turned to face Saraynea and stared at her for a moment before a smile formed on her face.

"I guess that does rub some salt in the wound of me leaving them in the first place."

"I'm glad you're staying too. We're getting a nice group together. It'd be sad if we lost a member." Feleine said.

"I wonder where Kheiryn went though." Mynh said as she looked up at the tree, but the moon bear was no longer there. "We need to be careful if we see her again. She's the strongest member of the clan."

"The strongest member? That's a little frightening since she seemed so disinterested in the fight." Feline said.

"She actually doesn't like to fight very much, but if she wanted to she could even finish off the warrior easily." Mynh added.

"Korramaru!" Saraynea suddenly remembered that she had been injured in the fight and the group approached Stormfang. Korramaru was laying on his back fast asleep. "Well, she did say that she couldn't sleep with him missing like that." Saraynea laughed.

"She still needs to have her shoulder bandaged though. We should head back into town." Feleine said.

"Next time, can you please include us?" Achamaru said as she bandaged Korramaru's shoulder. "We could have helped! I have a shield you know."

"Yeah we were really nervous when you were gone for that long." Ayumei agreed.

"Sorry about that." Saraynea said. "After hearing that her dragon was taken, I had to help. Once I saw that it was the Darkstorm duo, there was no running. We had to fight."

"I think we need to focus on avoiding them more than fighting." Feleine suggested. "I'm getting a little tired of running into those two."

"Well, Korramaru showed me a map of the mountains. We can try to lose them through there." Saraynea said.

"The mountains that run along the forest? It's really dangerous to travel through there." Achamaru explained.

"That's why I'm coming with you." Korramaru said.

"You're coming with us?" Ayumei asked with excitement in her voice.

"I owe you big time for helping me out. Stormfang is all I have. If something happened to him, I don't know what I'd do."

"Don't worry, you have all of us now!" Saraynea said. "We'll make sure those creeps don't try to hurt him again." Stormfang began to lick Saraynea's

face, forcing her to giggle.

"I think he likes that you can use electricity. Is that just a skill you have or...?"

"No she's a true shaman." Mynh answered.

"Wow a real shaman. Never thought I'd get to meet one. Is she as strong as the rumors?"

"She's strong all right. She's still recovering from a terrible arcane attack to her stomach." Feleine explained.

"At least I didn't pass out this time." Saraynea pointed out.

"They know to attack you there though. No matter how you try to attack them, they will always go for your stomach." Feleine said.

"We better get her to safety then." Korramaru stood up. "We should head out before those clan members come up with a new plan."

"It's your fault! If you hadn't lost your grip on that dragon!" Venomclaw growled.

"Me!? Maybe you shouldn't have wasted time taunting Mynh!" Kheiryn growled.

"She deserved it! That traitor!" she turned to Arcantis. "And you!"

"What!?" He roared back. "How is this my fault now!?"

"You're always boasting about your abilities! You couldn't think of a way to recapture that thing?"

"Would it even have mattered? You two were too busy fighting with Mynh! I'm not going to waste my time getting between you two."

"Stop arguing!" Darkstorm growled as he approached the two.

"Master Darkstorm! So sorry..." Venomclaw started.

"Yes I know that you failed already. If you had caught her then you would have reported right to me instead of hiding in this tent trying to plan how to present your failure to me. This failure is not as bad as the previous ones though. Since you've spent so much time trying to capture her, I have been able to

complete the corruption process. The corrupted spirit is ready for its vessel, and since I am no longer needed for that process, I can accompany you on your next trip. This time, we will collect our target."

## Part 6

The team stopped to set up a camp for the night. Korramaru and Mynh were cleaning a deer they had hunted while Achamaru and Ayumei were preparing the fire pit, and Feleine had gone fishing in a nearby river. Saraynea was upset not having any way to help so she approached Mynh to execute and idea she had come up with.

"Hey Mynh?" Saraynea greeted.

"Mhm?" Mynh replied continuing her work on the deer.

"If you have an extra hunting knife, can I borrow it for a while?" Without turning, Mynh pulled an extra blade from her belt and handed it to Saraynea. "Thanks!" she said and she searched the nearby area for a sturdy piece of wood.

"Well, here's the fish." Feleine said as she returned to the group.

"Wow nice job! Glad to know we'll have plenty of food tonight." Achamaru said happily.

"Preparing camp and gathering food. I love the feel of adventure!" Ayumei cheered. Feleine noticed Saraynea sitting by herself running the blade along a long piece of wood.

"What's she up to?" Feleine asked.

"She's been at it for a while, but I don't really know what she's making." Achamaru answered. Saraynea focused on her project even while the others were huddled around the fire, preparing to eat the food that was nearly finished cooking. When they divided the food into equal portions for everyone, Feleine approached Saraynea with a stick of deer meat and a stick with a fish.

"You should eat before it gets cold." Feleine said as she offered the food to Saraynea.

"Ah thanks! It smells awesome." Saraynea said as she quickly ate the food from the sticks.

"You've been working really hard on that. What is it?" Feleine asked before taking a bite of her own food.

"You'll see soon. It's almost done."

"It's a secret? Why?"

"Because I say so." Saraynea laughed. "Besides it wouldn't be a surprise if I said what it is."

"A surprise? For who?" Saraynea quietly stared at Feleine in response. The warm expression on her face made Feleine wonder if she was related to the project. "I'll let you keep at it so you can finish." Feleine said as she walked back to the fire with the others.

"How is you shoulder doing?" Achamaru asked to Korramaru.

"I'll be fine. I just need to sleep it off." She replied with a yawn as she leaned against Stormfang's side.

"I'm really happy that you came with us!" Ayumei cheered. "What'll it be like when we get up there?"

"Really cold and icy. I hope you like snow too."

"If it means we can lose those clan members, I don't mind." Mynh said.

"Revenge isn't supposed to be my thing, but I really want to make them pay for what they've done to Saraynea." Feleine said as she threw a piece of wood into the fire.

"You really care about that shaman, huh?" Korramaru asked.

"They're best friends." Ayumei smiled. Feleine rested her chin on her knees and perked her ears when she head Saraynea call for her.

"You should really be by the fire with us. You'll get sick if you don't stay warm." Feleine said as she approached. Without answering, Saraynea pulled a staff from behind her and held it out to Feleine.

"It's for you." Saraynea said.

"For me? Really?"

"So you have a weapon to defend yourself with."

"Wow! That's really nice of you. You really didn't have to." Feleine inspected the staff, impressed with how well-made it was. She slipped it under belt to keep it at her back before wrapping her arms around Saraynea.

When the group made it to the snowy base of the mountain trail, they had hunted

enough deer so that each member had a fur cloak to help protect them from a cold winds. They made sure to stay close together, especially when harsh winds blew. When visibility was badly hindered by the snowy winds, the team sought shelter in a cave. When everyone was inside, Saraynea closed the entrance using a rock wall. Korramaru lit a torch that was attached to Stormfang's saddle.

"This is a lot harder than I thought it'd be." Ayumei whined as she formed a flame in her paws.

"At least we're all still together. Having a shaman around is quite convenient. Closing off the entrance will certainly help to keep us safe." Korramaru said.

"I just hope the storm ends soon so we can keep going." Feleine said as she moved closer to Ayumei's flame.

"I'm sure I'll be able to sense when the winds calm down." Saraynea pressed her paw against the wall she had created. "Doesn't seem like it'll be any time soon though."

"I don't mind staying in the nice quiet cave." Achamaru said. "As long as this doesn't turn out to be the home of some giant monster or something."

"As far as I can tell, the cave is empty." Saraynea reassured her.

"Thank goodness!" Achamaru sighed with relief before resting against Ayumei's shoulder.

"We should rest while we can." Korramaru leaned against Stormfang and closed her eyes. The rest of the group settled down together to try to get some sleep to keep their energy up. Saraynea nuzzled into Feleine as she usually did when they would sleep.

Saraynea suddenly awoke and while she did not know why, she could not shake the feeling that they were being watched. She leaned up and stared at the wall she had made to cover the cave.

"You ok?" Feleine quietly asked as she was still trying to fully wake up.

"I have a strange feeling." she answered as she stood up. Feleine gently nudged Mynh until she woke up and together they woke up the others.

"What's going on?" Korramaru asked.

"Saraynea senses something." Mynh answered.

"Something? What exactly is *something*?" Achamaru asked.

"I'm not sure." Saraynea pressed her paw against the wall. "Something is standing outside...just standing in front of the wall."

"That's not creepy at all." Mynh said sarcastically as she stood up and prepared an arrow for her bow. Stormfang lifted his head and began to lowly growl.

"That's never a good sign." Korramaru drew her blades.

"Is it moving?" Ayumei asked.

"Maybe a creature that normally stays in the cave?" Achamaru wondered. Saraynea's arm suddenly tensed and she backed away from the wall.

"I don't think it's an ordinary creature. I just sensed a sudden burst of energy from whatever is out there." A thin crack began to travel from the floor to the top of the wall, splitting it in half. "Run!" Saraynea ordered and everyone began to run. Saraynea stayed behind the others and formed another wall behind them. Soon the entire cave shook. "Keep running! The cave continues!"

"What is that thing!?" Feleine asked running next to Saraynea.

"Whatever it is, it's strong. Honestly, losing it is our best option."

"If there's only one, then why aren't we fighting back?" Korramaru asked.

"Trust me, the energy I felt wasn't friendly!" the second wall shattered and a powerful gust of wind sent the team to the ground.

"I don't think we have a choice now." Korramaru quickly stood up and ran in front of everyone. From the cloud of dirt, a burst of electrical energy hit Korramaru and sent her flying back to the ground. Enraged, Stormfang breathed a long powerful storm breath toward where the attack came from.

"Is that it?" Ayumei asked after a short silence. Everyone stayed quiet. Saraynea easily recognized the sound the electricity and jumped to the front just as a large electric attack struck her.

"Sara!" Feleine yelled out as the electricity violently danced all over Saraynea's body. Saraynea refocused the energy and fired it back into the dust cloud.

"It reflected the attack." she said as she fell to one knee.

"What?" Feleine questioned in shock.

"Reflected lightning? What are we fighting?" Achamaru asked.

"Once we figure that out, we'll strike back with full power!" Korramaru helped Saraynea stand again so the group could continue their retreat. Suddenly all at once, their feet began to slide beneath them and they all collapsed on a floor of ice. Stormfang's sharp claws slid against the ice as he tried to grip it, but he slammed into the wall of the room, causing large icicles to crash into the floor, forming large cracks in the ice.

"Sara, please tell me we're standing on solid ice." Korramaru grumbled. Having a strong connection to the elements, Saraynea was able to stand up on the icy floor without slipping.

"It's just a sheet of ice above a vertical drop."

"Exactly what I hoped it wasn't." Korramaru's rage continued to build as she stuck her blades into the ice so she could stand. Feeling the air move, Saraynea was able to barely dodge a punch that shattered part of the icicle she stood next to. The beast struck quickly and with a lot of power, forcing Saraynea to quickly dodge and run away.

"Who is that!?" Achamaru yelled as she and the others watched a large figure chase Saraynea around. Saraynea used her claws to grab onto the rock wall.

"What do you mean *who*?" she asked but before she could get a look, she had to dodge the beast as it slammed into the wall where she had just been.

"You sure move around a lot." A deep voice growled and a ball of ice formed around one of Saraynea's paw, causing her stick to the wall when she landed on the rock again. She quickly formed fire in her paws to break free of the ice as well as form a quick fire shield around her when she spun before landing on the ice, causing it to crack more. When the massive brown bear landed, the ice layer cracked loudly. On his paws he had massive metal claw weapons. "I'm actually surprised at how well you move considering your injury." He said.

"Who are you?" Saraynea asked.

"Someone you've feared for a long time." Darkstorm answered and he rammed into Saraynea, holding her against the wall. His open paw he

concentrated electricity and pressed it into her, electrocuting her with a large amount of energy. Her screaming stopped as soon as his attack did, but without delay, he used a wind power to force her into the air close to the ceiling, and used the wind to turn her so she faced upward. He jumped above her and delivered a powerful blow using both his fists into her stomach. Saraynea's crash into the ice floor was enough to cause it to shatter and send everyone down the ice tunnels while the attacker clung to the wall, watching his prey fall beneath him. As they slid down, they became separated through the many tunnels in the mountain.

Korramaru slowly opened her eyes, recovering from the fall. Nearby she heard coughing followed by pained groaning. She quickly leaned up and saw Saraynea had landed nearby.

"Hey, are you alright?" she asked remembering the vicious fight she had before the ice shattered. Her stomach cramped when she saw blood near Saraynea's muzzle as well as on the corner of her mouth as she lay on her side. Korramaru slowly lifted Saraynea's shirt and saw that her wound was bleeding into the bandages. "This is bad..." she said to herself. She looked into Saraynea's eyes but she did not react. She seemed to be consumed by pain. "Stay with me now. You'll be ok." She said as she carefully pulled Saraynea onto her back.

"Feleine? Wake up!" Feleine slowly woke up and leaned up to see Ayumei kneeling next to her. "Thank the spirits! Are you ok?"

"I think so." Feleine answered as she stood up. "Where are we?"

"We all got separated in those tunnels."

"Separated? All of us? Have you seen anyone else?"

"I think it's just you and me for now. I hope they're all ok."

"We have to look for them!"

"Hey wait! Be careful, there're a lot of slopes around." Ayumei warned as she grabbed onto Feleine's arm.

"We can't just sit still and do nothing." Feleine said looking over her shoulder at Ayumei. Suddenly her foot slipped under her and the two fell down another tunnel. For just a moment Feleine saw Mynh standing in the middle of another open room, but no matter how hard she tried to stop, she and Ayumei crashed into Mynh forcing them along to the tunnel that opened on the other end. The tunnel often curved and twisted, making for a fun ride for Ayumei who enjoyed it where Feleine and Mynh screamed from an unwanted rush. The tunnel ended and the trio fell into the next room.

"Let's do that again!" Ayumei cheered.

"No!" Feleine and Mynh answered.

"No! No more ice, no more tunnels, I'm sick of this place!" Feleine whined.

"The ice may not be the worst of it." Mynh said when a growling sound came from another tunnel. Suddenly Stormfang ran into the room and dashed right for Mynh, knocking her onto her back again.

"Hey! You're all ok!" Achamaru said as she jumped off of Stormfang's back.

"Achamaru!" Ayumei cheered as she tightly hugged her sister.

"Ugh! Stop slobbering all over my bangs!" Mynh ordered as Stormfang licked her face.

"Well, at least we managed to find each other this quickly! We just need to find Saraynea and Korramaru now." Achamaru said.

"I'm worried about Sara. She took a serious blow right before we fell." Mynh said as she stood up. "We should start looking for them."

"We should probably ride Stormfang for now just to make sure we're all together in case we slip again." After a short walk through the caves, the floor soon became less covered with ice, making traveling easier. A whistle echoed through the tunnels.

"What was that?" Feleine questioned when Stormfang suddenly began to run. He stopped when he entered a room where Korramaru was.

"Good to see you too Stormfang! And everyone else too. Convenient."

"I'm glad we're all together again." Achamaru said.

"Me too. I don't like when we all get separated." Ayumei agreed. Feleine suddenly noticed that Korramaru had Saraynea on her back.

"Is she ok?" Feleine rushed off Stormfang and over to Saraynea who was resting her head on Korramaru's shoulder.

"She's badly hurt actually. I guess since we're all together now, we can try to help her." Korramaru suggested.

"You can put me down." Saraynea said weakly.

"No way. I don't think you'll even be able to stand on you own."

"Then take me close to a wall." She asked and Korramaru stood close to a wall where Saraynea placed her paw.

"I think she's checking the tunnels." Achamaru said.

"He's coming." Saraynea said as she turned her head. "He knows exactly where we are and he's coming right for us."

"How do you know?" Korramaru asked in a low voice, not wanting the tunnels to echo.

"He's a shaman. I'm sure of it. And he's not alone. I can sense others in the tunnels."

"Are you serious? I guess we better get ready for a fight."

"What about Sara though? We should get her out of here." Feleine suggested. The ground began to shake and a strong wind rushed from one of the tunnels.

"I think it's too late for that." Mynh said as she readied her bow. Achamaru drew her blade and held her shield up while Ayumei stood behind her in her own battle stance. Korramaru carefully placed Saraynea on Stormfang's back so she could take out both of her blades. Another gust blew around the room, stirring the dust and forcing the team to cover their eyes for a moment. When the room was still again, in front of them stood the brown bear who attacked Saraynea along with Arcantis and Venomclaw at his sides.

"This just became much worse than I thought." Achamaru said.

"So you're allied with those creeps?" Korramaru questioned.

"How dare you speak like that in front of the master!" Arcantis yelled.

"The *master*? Ayumei repeated. "How can this get any worse?" the leader of the enemy laughed at the statement.

"This doesn't have to get any worse. In fact, there doesn't have to be any bloodshed at all right here."

"Assuming you get what you want without a fight." Korramaru snorted.

"Of course. That is, if you're willing to give her up to us." Darkstorm said setting his gaze on Saraynea who was barely able to sit up on Stormfang's back.

"You're clearly in charge of those fools." The team shuttered at Korramaru's comment.

"What makes you say that?" Venomclaw asked.

"Because he's just as stupid as you two are." Arcantis and Venomclaw growled and prepared to fight.

"Be sure that she dies in a bloody heap. By the time you finish with that, I should have the target and we'll be out of here." With his orders given, Venomclaw and Arcantis rushed into battle. Venomclaw targeted Korramaru right away, their blades clanging against each other in fast strikes. Arcantis began to charge an attack, but was quickly interrupted when Achamaru used her shield to slam into him.

"You may have the numbers, but we have the strength!" Arcantis yelled as he prepared another attack, but was stopped again when a large ball of frost landed in his eyes.

"Brawn doesn't mean anything when you don't have the brains to back it up!" Ayumei taunted.

"You brat! You're just a cub!"

"I'm smaller *and* better than you." Ayumei winked and stuck out her tongue. Arcantis turned to Ayumei, but Achamaru stood between them, allowing Ayumei to be safe while charging up her attacks.

"You think you're little snowballs will be enough to bring me down!?" he growled as their fight continued.

Darkstorm slowly approached the large hissing dragon while ignoring the rest of the fighting going on in the room. Feleine placed herself between him and Saraynea. Darkstorm stopped and stared at her for a moment. "Do you really think that's a good idea? Sure you've strangely proven to be trouble for my captains, but you know just as well as I do that all you're doing is unnecessarily

placing yourself in a bad position." Feleine stayed quiet, focusing on the advice from a memory.

"Feleine, you really should try to make at least one friend." Ironclaw suggested as he watched Feleine train using a dummy target.

"I don't need anyone else to help me become stronger." Feleine replied without pausing.

"You need to understand something." He said causing Feleine to stop and turn around. "What are you training for? Why do you want to be stronger?"

"So I can fight any opponent. I want to be as strong as I can become."

"You will never find that power when fighting for yourself. You'll never be able to use your deeper strength in such a scenario."

"Why wouldn't I fight with all my strength? That just doesn't make sense."

"Strength is best used to protect. You haven't truly found something to protect. You'll find that when protecting something you love, you'll find a whole new level of power, but you will never reach it with the way you currently train."

"I love this home though. That's what I'd used all my strength to protect!" After a moment of silence, Ironclaw quickly hit Feleine on her head with his staff.

"What was that for!?" Feleine growled. Ironclaw chuckled.

"Protecting the town is the job of us masters. You are a student. You have to start much smaller. You'll understand when you find that something you really love and want to protect." He finished before walking away, leaving Feleine to continue to rub the top of her head while she pondered the meaning of what he told her.

"Are you going to just stand there like that? Do you think you can just intimidate me with that glare? What will you even do when I actually get close?" Darkstorm smiled as he took a step forward. Before he could make another move, Feleine charged at him and raised one of her paws. Darkstorm turned his paw up, lifting up a large chunk of rock from the ground. When Feleine struck the rock, it quickly shattered and without delay she performed a backward spin kick which shattered another rock. Darkstorm backed away and brought his paws together to create a flamethrower at Feleine who used her own paws to

create a large ball of fire that cut through his fire and ended the attack.

"I've heard of monks being able to use such advanced techniques, though I've never witnessed it before." Seeing an opening while Darkstorm continued to talk, Feleine grabbed her staff and in one swing pulled it from her belt and struck him on his head with it. Immediately after, she felt like it was a silly and sloppy attack, but was also surprised at the sound it made against Darkstorm's skull and that it caused him to back away as he rubbed the impact point. "Well that was just rude...and also very foolish!" he roared as lightning began to rush around his paws. When he launched his attack, the lightning took a sharp turn away from Feleine and soon Saraynea's cry of agony echoed through the room before she fell to her knees.

"You redirected the attack without knowing how to reflect it!?" Darkstorm laughed. Feleine felt a rush of rage that she never felt before and charged Darkstorm again. She dodged his claws as he tried to strike at her and grabbed his arm with her paw and turned her body so she could deliver a powerful kick with the back of her foot to his face, sending him a few wobbly steps backward. He growled loudly and formed more lightning. Saraynea tried to stand up as quickly as she could and reached out her paw again, pulling on the lightning. She cried out again and fell to the floor.

"Sara you have to stop that!" Feleine ordered and powerful winds formed around her before she was suddenly sent flying across the room.

"I'll finish you off later." Darkstorm growled and he approached Saraynea again.

Korramaru felt the cold rock against her back when her blades clashed against Venomclaw's again, the blades screeched as they tried to push each other away. "Nowhere else to go." Venomclaw snickered.

"Actually, I just can't move backward anymore." Venomclaw was confused at Korramaru's confidence and suddenly found her blades stuck into the rock after Korramaru had quickly moved to the side. Before she could pull her blades out, a large amount of frost had been thrown at her paws and instantly froze them to the wall. Venomclaw growled as she tried to pull herself away.

"You'll pay for that!" Arcantis yelled as he began to form an attack but Stormfang had breathed his own attack to protect Korramaru and the clash of the energies caused an explosion that sent Arcantis into a wall. "Huh, didn't even have to move that time." Korramaru said to Venomclaw who snarled back in response.

"We have to help Saraynea!" Achamaru called to Korramaru while Ayumei helped Feleine to stand up again. They all ran toward Darkstorm, but he formed a thick barrier of ice around himself and Saraynea, who was struggling to get up. The rock under her paws and feet moved to surround them before lifting her up and forcing her back against the wall. Outside the ice she heard her friends pounding at the wall, trying to break in. Saraynea felt consumed in fear as she was helpless before Darkstorm who smiled at her.

"While this took more effort than I thought, alone you're so easy to capture." He said as he lifted her shirt and tore her bandages off. "This is a more serious wound than I thought it was. I can worry about it later though. Besides, you're not ready yet."

"Ready? For what?" Saraynea felt like she was about to regret asking.

"I spent a long time creating my own corruption that takes over spirits. After perfecting it, I plucked an ideal spirit from the spirit realm and placed my corruption on it."

"That's impossible!"

"Ah but there's one problem that I cannot fix...as with all spirits, it still cannot remain in our realm before it begins to lose power. It still needs a vessel to keep it safe." He leaned toward Saraynea's ear. "That's what I need you for." He whispered.

"I'd never help you with such a thing!"

"You won't have a choice. There was the issue that you could try to fight it off, but with this wound..." he placed his claws close to the wound on her stomach as a strange dark aura formed around his paw. Saraynea tried to struggle but she was barely able to move as he pressed his paw against her wound. Her stomach turned and her wound stung deep inside her. "This wound is the perfect doorway for the spirit to enter your body as well as a weak point for it to strike as it gains control over you."

"What are you doing!?" she whimpered through the pain.

"Don't worry about it." He answered as he pulled his paw back, though her pain continued. "There's nothing you can do about it. However, while you have shown that you are strong, you are equally as untrained. If the spirit were to enter you now, it would likely kill you right away. So, I'm letting you go for now."

"What?"

"But don't worry. We'll meet again soon enough. I just need you to become stronger so you'll be ready for when we next meet." Winds began to swirl around Darkstorm when he finished his statement. Saraynea closed her eyes to shield them from the winds and dirt that was stirred up.

"Feleine! Strike here!" Korramaru said and she backed away from the spot she used her blades to create a crack in the ice wall. Feleine slammed her paw into the mark, causing the ice to crack around the weak point. After another powerful attack, the ice shattered but only Saraynea on her paws and knees remained inside.

"Sara! Are you ok?" Feleine said as she quickly slid to her knees close to her friend. Saraynea lifted her head, revealing her tear-filled eyes.

"He...I..." she tried to speak but did not even know what to say. Instead she let out a whimper as the tears began to flood down her cheeks and buried her face into Feleine's shoulder as she tightly clung onto the back of her shirt. Feleine quickly placed her arms around Saraynea, but had no idea what to say. She turned toward the others, all sharing the same expression of worry.

"We have to get out of here. We have to get her somewhere safe." Mynh said.

"How?" Ayumei quietly asked.

"We'll get those two to tell us!" Korramaru turned, but Venomclaw and Arcantis were gone.

"They must have vanished when their leader did." Achamaru said.

"Filthy cowards!" Korramaru growled.

"It's ok. I can get us out." Saraynea said as she calmed down and leaned away from Feleine.

"Sara, it's fine. We can find a way out." She said.

"This place is massive and it's mostly made of tunnels. We'll be stuck here for a while. I can feel the tunnels to find the way out."

"Are you sure?" Feleine asked. Saraynea looked into her eyes and slowly nodded. "Just don't push yourself." Feleine finished as she stood up. When Saraynea made no attempt to stand up, Feleine held out her paw and helped Saraynea to her feet, though she struggled as her legs felt weak. Korramaru walked up to Saraynea and turned around to help lift her onto her back again. With Saraynea's guidance, the team made it out of the tunnels and back outside. Not too far down the path was a thick forest. Seeing how thick and quiet it was made it an inviting place to the team and they made their way down so they could set up a camp as soon as possible.

## Part 7

"We should wrap your leg if it still hurts." Achamaru suggested to Saraynea who was on her back while Feleine sat close, massaging the injury.

"I think it'll be fine. Whatever Feleine is doing, it feels amazing!" Saraynea answered. Feleine smiled, but did not say anything as she continued.

"That's good, but we still need to wrap your stomach again anyway." Achamaru said and she began to walk toward Korramaru and Stormfang.

"Are you ok?" Feleine asked once Achamaru was far enough away.

"What do you mean?"

"I've known since we first met that you'll hide your pain beneath a brave shell, but I want you to talk to me if you need to."

"Woah that's the deepest thing you've ever said to me." Saraynea said with a laugh, but Feleine just stared at her. "But really, I guess I'm ok. It's just my leg and stomach that are bothering me right now."

"I'm not talking about the physical injuries." Saraynea was surprised at Feleine's serious tone. "I don't want to bring it up too much, but clearly something that happened under that ice dome seriously bothered you."

"He was just threatening me. I was trapped and really scared at the time." She replied and turned her head. Feleine was not sure if she regretted asking, seeing how quickly the thought affected her. She looked down and focused on massaging Saraynea's injured leg. Korramaru returned with clean bandages. "Someone actually had some bandages?"

"Of course. What do you think all those packs are for on Stormfang's saddle?" Korramaru answered. She glanced at Feleine and paused when she saw a thin green flame gently swirling around Feleine's paws, which she was blankly staring at like she was in a trance. Seeing that Korramaru was distracted, Saraynea leaned up and stared at the mysterious fire as well.

"Whatever she's doing, it's making my leg feel much better!"

"Hey, Feleine?" Korramaru tried to get her attention. "Hello? What are you doing there?"

"What?" Feleine suddenly looked back.

"What is that around your paws?" Korramaru asked causing Feleine to look down again.

"Woah!" Feleine raised her paws and shook them, as she tried to rid them of the fire. "What was that?"

"You don't know? You were the one doing it after all."

"N-no I have no idea what that was! It's never happened before." Feleine said as she examined her paws. Saraynea quickly stood up and bent her knees, testing her leg.

"Much better! Whatever you did, it worked."

"Did you just heal her?" Korramaru asked.

"I was just massaging it, but I didn't think you'd be able to stand up like that already."

"Can you do that again? The green fire I mean." Korramaru asked.

"I don't even know how I did it in the first place."

"Well, it's just an idea, but I think that fire of yours can heal." Korramaru smiled.

"That's awesome! We could use a healer in the group! And we don't even have to find one now!" Saraynea cheered.

"Woah hold on! I still don't know what it was or how it happened! I've never trained in healing. I never knew I could even do that." Feleine said.

"I guess it's something we can try to figure out later. We still have to finish setting up camp after all." Korramaru quickly finished bandaging Saraynea's stomach. "Can you gather some water?" she asked handing a bucket to Saraynea.

"Sure, I guess." The red panda replied.

"Mynh said she heard some water flowing near some rocks not too far from the path we used to get down the mountain."

"Alright. Better than sitting around I guess." Saraynea took the bucket and walked back toward the direction of the mountain.

"What did she tell you?" Korramaru quietly asked when they could no

longer hear Saraynea's footsteps in the snow. Feleine sighed.

"Not much. I can tell that she's hiding something. Something big."

"If she's going to tell anyone, it'll be you. If he had to talk to her under a dome like that, who knows what he told her. I'm concerned about what's going on inside her head after that fight."

"Me too, but I'm so afraid to ask. I don't want to force her to think about it too much."

"Just keep a close eye on her. We all are just to be safe."

Saraynea twitched violently in her sleep as she battled in her nightmare. Before her stood a tall black monster that she could barely make out in the darkness that surrounded her. The beast laughed at her as it grew taller. She wanted to run, but her legs would not move. When she felt like her fear could not grow any more, she suddenly began to fall before landing on her back. The creature pressed its massive claw onto her body, pinning her down.

"You're too weak!!" the creature laughed.

"Let me go! I won't let you merge with me!"

"You don't have a choice!" the claw began to sink into the scar on her stomach, causing a severe sharp pain and forcing her to cry out. "Your friends can't hear you. No one can help you now!" Saraynea leaned up, gasping and sweating. She quickly glanced around and saw everyone sleeping in the camp.

"Are you ok?" Feleine whispered as she sat up.

"It was just a bad dream. I was being attacked."

"Hey, it's ok. Mynh is keeping watch like she does every night." Feleine pointed at a tree where Mynh was sitting in a high branch. Saraynea lie down again and tried to calm down.

"What was that!?" Saraynea jumped and turned around.

"Sorry. I stepped on a branch under the snow." Ayumei replied.

"Oh..." Saraynea sighed and looked around for another piece of wood to bring back to camp with Ayumei.

"Are you ok? We can head back if you want."

"No, I'm fine. Really. Everyone keeps asking me if I'm ok."

"You just seem kind of jumpy lately."

"I just didn't get a lot of sleep last night is all."

"Ah here you are." A voice said right behind Saraynea. She yelled out and quickly turned around and took several steps back. As soon as she saw Achamaru's surprised expression she felt her face burn up and looked down at the wood in her arms. "Sorry, I didn't mean to sneak up on you like that. I just wanted to see where you two ended up."

"Why? Did you see something out in the woods? Any large shadowy monsters?"

"Uh, no, can't say I've seen anything like that." Achamaru did not know exactly what else to say. Saraynea glanced at Achamaru and Ayumei, both had confused expressions.

"Why are you two looking at me like that?" Saraynea asked. Achamaru walked up to her and placed her paws on Saraynea's cheeks.

"You look exhausted." She said looking into her eyes.

"She had a bad night." Ayumei said.

"You should head back to camp and try to take a nap or something. I think we have enough for now." Achamaru said as she took the wood from Saraynea's arms and they returned to the camp. Feleine approached Saraynea when they returned. Before she could even say anything, Saraynea leaned into her and nuzzled into her shoulder.

"You ok?"

"She's super tired." Ayumei answered for her. Saraynea yawned, proving Ayumei's response to be true.

"I'm going to try to sleep." Saraynea said and she returned to the spot where she had slept, but after turning onto her side, she remembered her nightmares and decided to just lie on the ground for a while to try to regain some energy. Feleine sat in front of her view.

"If you're going to just lie here, you might as well try to sleep."

"I just want to lie down for a little while." Saraynea answered, realizing to herself that she was actually afraid to close her eyes and try to sleep. Every time she did, she would have horrible vivid nightmares which were getting worse with each night. Due to her exhaustion, the team decided to stay at the camp hoping that she would recover.

Saraynea felt her heart race as she realized she was surrounded by darkness again. Before she saw him, she heard Darkstorm laughing. Small dark beasts began to try to climb onto her body.

"Get off! Leave me alone!" she ordered as she swiped them away, but they would just run right back and cling to her again.

"Is that the best you can do?" Darkstorm teased.

"I'm not afraid of you!"

"Are you sure?" Darkstorm's body began to transform into the large shadow beast that haunted her nightmares. Even his laugh changed during the transformation. "You're powerless against me and your fear is overwhelming you. Just give up! You will never be strong enough to defy me!" More small beasts began to cling to Saraynea, causing her to swipe and lash out with her claws even more.

The wound on her stomach began to emit a dark purple aura as Feleine and the others tried to wake her up.

"Sara wake up!!" Feleine yelled.

"This is the worst I've seen her." Achamaru said.

"She must be having a really bad nightmare." Ayumei said quietly.

"Come on! It's just a dream!" Feleine continued to avoid Saraynea's flailing claws. Her outburst finally ended as she opened her eyes and leaned up, glancing around at everyone and her surroundings.

"You were having another nightmare." Mynh said.

"You were screaming and clawing at everyone." Korramaru said.

"I was what?" Saraynea was still trying to calm down when she noticed blood on Feleine's arm. Seeing that she was staring at the scratches, Feleine tried to cover them with her other paw. "Did I do that to you?" "Don't worry about it. You didn't know what you were doing." Realizing that she had hurt her best friend, Saraynea pushed Feleine as she stood up and ran into the woods.

"Wait! Come back!" Feleine yelled as she quickly ran after her.

Saraynea stopped and listened for a moment. She did not know how far she had run from the camp. She heard footsteps in the snow and stood still, assuming Feleine had caught up to her, but she was not ready to return to the camp.

"Well, that search wasn't so hard." A familiar, but not comforting voice said. Saraynea turned her head and saw Venomclaw lunge toward her with her blades. She dodged and slipped in the snow, having trouble keeping her footing from exhaustion. She hoped that Feleine was nearby and would be able to help fight. Having no idea where camp was from their location, Saraynea chose a random direction and tried to start running again, knowing that she was too weak to defend herself against any of the clan members. Suddenly black tendrils wrapped around her body, completely immobilizing her and one even wrapped around her snout. Having never experienced such an attack before, fear rushed through Saraynea's body.

"Kheiryn? What are you doing here?" Venomclaw growled. Saraynea was surprised at her confused and angry tone, but was happy that there was some form of distraction for her enemy.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Kheiryn jumped from a branch and stood before Saraynea. From behind her black wings were the shadow tendrils that were used to capture her target. "That wasn't very difficult. Makes me wonder why you and Arcantis had such a hard time."

"Do you even know why I came out here?" Venomclaw snapped.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't have followed." Kheiryn answered, causing Venomclaw to angrily sigh in response.

"I came to find her just to fight her. I wanted to make sure that she's actually training like Darkstorm ordered her to. I wasn't planning on taking her hostage again."

"Oh, so you expect her to do something because he told her to?" Kheiryn questioned with disbelief in her tone.

"Unless she just wants to die the next time she meets with him, then yes,

training should be her top priority." Venomclaw tied Saraynea's paws, feet, and snout allowing Kheiryn to pull back her tendrils. "Might as well hold onto her for now until we think of something else."

"So she's the one then?" Kheiryn knelt down to Saraynea's level as she sat in the snow. "Not what I expected really."

"Well, she's been more timid since Arcantis hit her with the arcane attack." Without replying, Kheiryn gently lifted Saraynea's shirt to reveal her bandaged stomach. When she went to place her paw on the wound, Saraynea violently struggled and rolled onto her side. "What are you doing?" Vencomclaw asked.

"Hold still darling." Kheiryn said in a calm voice and reached for the wound again. Saraynea's stomach turned as she felt a sharp pain deep within her. Kheiryn flinched and pulled her paw back when a dark energy quickly surrounded it as if it was attacking her. "Oh my...now was that really necessary?"

"What are you talking about?"

"There's dark energy deep in her wound. From the way it feels, I assume it's Darkstorm's doing."

"If he put it there, then it's there for a reason. Why are you so interested anyway? You're not even a healer, so it's not like there's anything we could do about it."

"Do you ever question his reasoning or ideas?"

"I'm a loyal member, so unlike you, no I don't." Venomclaw replied. Kheiryn silently looked back down at Saraynea who curiously stared back. Clearly they were both a part of the clan, yet Kheiryn seemed different for more reasons than her wings. Saraynea found it interesting how they so easily argued with each other.

Later on, Saraynea sat up against a tree watching as the two clan members bickered over little details as if they just wanted an excuse to fight with each other. While it was somewhat entertaining and interesting, as time passed she became more afraid as there was no sign of her friends. She was in trouble and there was nothing she could do. She lowered her head and thought for a while about what might happen to her if she could not escape. She sensed eyes staring at her, but she did not move. She flinched when she noticed a paw nearing her

face, assuming that it was going to hurt her, however a gentle finger pressed against her cheek instead to remove the tears that had fallen. Confused, she looked up and saw Kheiryn who just quietly stared into her eyes. "If you want to stand that close, could you keep an eye on her while I head out for some supplies?"

"Sure." Kheiryn answered without changing her gaze. She only looked back to see if Venomclaw had gone. She stood up and reached with the tendrils from her back to wrap around Saraynea and lift her from the ground. Saraynea would have asked where she was being taken if she was not muzzled. After a long walk, Kheiryn stopped and placed Saraynea on the ground before releasing her from her bonds. "There. Now you can return to your friends." Kheiryn said, but Saraynea sat on the ground, silently staring back at her. "What are you waiting for? Venomclaw is already suspicious of me, so you should get out of here before she returns to the camp and finds the both of us missing."

"Why?" Saraynea quietly asked. "You're just letting me go?"

"You're going to question it? Don't you want to return to your team?"

"I just don't understand. You're one of them." Saraynea said though she wondered how true her words were. Kheiryn softly laughed in response.

"Sara!" Feleine called and the entire team rushed from the trees to help her.

"You again!" Korramaru growled as she drew her blades at Kheiryn. Stormfang also growled, his temper matching his master's.

"Are you ok?" Feleine asked as she knelt beside Saraynea.

"Yeah I'm fine. Though I still can't really believe it." she replied looking back at Kheiryn.

"Is she the only one? We can all take her on." Achamaru said.

"Wait! She helped me!" Saraynea defended her.

"You can't be serious! She's a member of the clan! We should just take her out now while she's outnumbered." Korramaru suggested.

"Outnumbered, yes, but not out-powered, dear. Not that it matters. I'm not here to fight any of you. I just wanted to deliver your friend and leave without any bloodshed." Kheiryn said in a calm tone.

"Deliver? What are you talking about?" Achamaru questioned.

"I was captured, but when Venomclaw left the camp, Kheiryn took me out here and let me go." Saraynea explained.

"Sounds nice, but it just doesn't make sense." Mynh said.

"Well, she's not hurt." Ayumei said.

"So we just walk away and do nothing?" Korramaru asked.

"I know it sounds crazy, but she's different." Saraynea still did not understand either, but she could not help but feel grateful toward Kheiryn, who suddenly giggled to herself.

"What's so funny!?" Korramaru asked as she tightened her grip on her blades.

"You are." Kheiryn answered. "I brought your friend safely. Why are you so angry? Do you hate me that much?" she asked as she slowly approached Korramaru, who was unsure of how to react. "That's amusing. I like you." She said as she tapped Korramaru's nose with her finger.

"What?" Korramaru questioned.

"You so easily become blindly enraged. I find it very entertaining."

"I have to admit that she's quite different from the other clan members we've met." Feleine said quietly to Saraynea. "If she were anyone else, she'd be trying to kill us already."

"You mean like Venomclaw? Ah she is an irritating one isn't she? I love messing with her any way I can, but nothing beats replacing her team's drinks with my potions and causing them to breathe fire."

"Breathing fire? Sounds like a serious potion." Achamaru said.

"Of course I know more useful ones, but I have to have fun sometimes. Being the best alchemist is a lot of work when you have to make enough potions for the entire clan."

"So what happens when this friendly chat ends?" Korramaru asked, losing patience with a member of the enemy clan standing before her.

"I don't know." Kheiryn replied.

"What do you mean you don't know!? You don't expect us to just let you walk away and go about your business serving the enemy do you!?" For a long

moment, no one spoke while Kheiryn appeared to be in a deep thought as she scratched the white patch of fur on her chest.

"What if I didn't serve your enemy, but you instead?"

"What kind of answer is that?"

"Seeing that Mynh left and survived is quite inspiring."

"If you don't like them, then why do you stay?" Achamaru asked.

"Because if you try to leave, the clan hunts you and tries to kill you." Kheiryn explained. "But Mynh here is still alive. Perhaps it's a sign that I should quit playing their little game as well."

"Are you coming with us then?" Ayumei asked.

"I don't like the idea. We're going to accept her into the team just because she says that she quits? What if she turns around and tells their leader everything?"

"Are you always this angry?" Kheiryn asked to Korramaru. "Alright, I'll play fair. I won't join you if you say no. *But* if I can convince you to change your mind..."

"If it's a duel you want, you'll get one! I doubt it'll do much to change my mind though." Korramaru growled.

"I already told you, dear, I'm not interested in fighting you." Kheiryn's wings split into several shadow tendrils. Two of them wrapped around Korramaru's wrists and raised her arms above her head while the others moved close to her body.

"If this isn't a fight then what are you doing?" Korramaru asked.

"I'll give you one last chance to say I can join you."

"You don't seriously expect this to be threatening do you? So you think you're little tentacles are going to scare me? Even if my arms fall asleep, I won't say yes." After a short pause, Kheiryn's lips pulled to a smile and the tendrils began to wriggle against Korramaru's body.

"Just let me know when you change your mind." Kheiryn said.

"Stop it! Is this some kind of joke!?" Korramaru tried to sound angry, but was not able to control her laughter.

"Well I'm glad I didn't pick a fight with her." Achamaru said.

"I'm just glad it's not me this time." Feleine said.

"Don't worry, Feleine! We'll make sure to get you next time!" Ayumei cheered.

"Don't even think about it!"

"She already did." Achamaru laughed causing Feleine to sigh before she turned to Saraynea.

"Why did you run off like that?"

"I hurt you Feleine. You're my best friend."

"Hey, you didn't know what was going on. I don't blame you. We'll help you get rid of the nightmares, but please don't run off like that again. I'm worried about you enough as it is."

"Fine!" Korramaru yelled. "I don't care! Just make it stop!"

"I can join your team?" Kheiryn asked in a gentle voice.

"Yes!"

"Ok I'll stop...if you say please." Kheiryn teased.

"What!? No way! I said yes so stop it!"

"Korramaru has to say please to her? I don't think she's getting out of that for a while." Ayumei laughed as she enjoyed watching the torment continue.

"When she first attacked us, I thought she was evil, but now she seems kind of like...both." Achamaru said.

"That's exactly how she is." Mynh said as she sat down next to her. "She can be the best ally or your worst enemy. She's just as deadly as she is nice."

"Does anyone feel like helping!?" Korramaru cried out.

"And risk getting caught in all that? Sorry Korramaru!" Ayumei called back.

"Cut it out already! As soon as I get out, I'll make sure you regret this!"

"You're going to attack me? I better not stop then and make sure you get too tired to get your revenge."

"Please, please, please!!" Korramaru cried.

"Oh my...I truly did not expect you to submit. That's a little disappointing actually." Kheiryn gently placed Korramaru on the ground where she lie on her side heavily gasping while the tendrils on Kheiryn's back merged and formed into wings again. "Looks like even the strongest warrior has a weakness." she smiled.

"I guess we'll meet you there. Someone should check on Korramaru." Achamaru said as she, Ayumei, and Mynh led Kheiryn toward the camp. Feleine and Saraynea stood near Korramaru as Stormfang nudged her with his snout.

"Next time I'll kick her tail!" Korramaru said weakly.

"I think you should wait a while before then." Saraynea suggested.

"Yeah. I need a nap." Korramaru slowly climbed onto one of Stormfang's neck and closed her eyes.

Soon after returning to camp, Saraynea remembered how tired she felt and was closely nestled into Feleine's shoulder as she sat against a tree. Kheiryn approached and stared at Saraynea for a moment before lifting her shirt to look at the scar again. "Oh dear that's much worse than I thought it'd be."

"Can you help her?" Feleine asked.

"I'm not sure, but I have an idea of what kind of corruption this is since I do have a strong connection to shadow magic. Just be prepared. This might hurt a little." Kheiryn held her paw near the wound on Saraynea's stomach. A dark purple aura began to form around her paw as well as emit from Saraynea's stomach as she began to twitch from the pain. "That's strong magic. And I can sense that this wound is deep. I'll try to purify it." Kheiryn took a deep breath as she focused. The dark aura around her paws turned to a bright gold as did her wings. The corruption battled against the healing power and both Kheiryn and Saraynea shrieked suddenly. Kheiryn stood up and stared at the deep scratches that covered her paw. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised." She said as the gold aura swirled around her paw, healing the scratches. Since she was already more aligned toward the light, she quickly healed Feleine's arm as well before her wings turned black again.

"You're a healer!" Saraynea leaned up. "But, Venomclaw mentioned that you couldn't heal."

"You think I'd tell my little secret to the clan?" Kheiryn smirked.

"Is there anything you can do for her?" Feleine asked, hopeful for new information.

"Well, most of the corruption is sticking to her wound since it's an easy weak spot. It seems like it's spreading throughout her body."

"Spreading? How?"

"The corruption is feeding off of her fears and when she suffers from the emotion, the corruption becomes stronger causing its effects to become stronger as well. To put it short and simple: she's trapped in a loop of a losing battle. There's nothing she can do to overcome it on her own."

"Can you heal her?"

"I can lean more toward the element of light, but I'm afraid I cannot help her other than to try to force the corruption to shrink which is what I just did. She won't suffer as much as she has from it, but it will start to grow again."

"But if you're a healer and you can't fix it, what can we do?"

"Well, not all hope is lost. Darkstorm himself is a shaman. He created this corruption from the dark essence of spirits from the spirit realm. Our best chance would be to find another shaman to purify her."

"We need another shaman? But they're so rare." Feleine said.

"Finding another one may not be as hard as you'd think." Kheiryn gave a comforting smile.

"You know of another one somewhere?" Feleine asked.

"I'm not positive, but when I was scouting the area, I thought I saw some shaman activity on the side of a hill in the forest." Kheiryn explained.

"Then we should go! The sooner we fix this, the better."

"Patience, darling. Don't forget that your swordswoman is taking a nap and this one is exhausted too." Kheiryn pointed down at Saraynea. Feleine lowered her gaze and saw that Saraynea was struggling to not fall asleep. "I'll try to guide you toward where I saw the activity once everyone is fully rested."

"Thank you Kheiryn. You've been extremely helpful already."

"Don't worry about it. It's nice to know I'm more appreciated here than when I was with that clan."

Feleine opened her eyes while the stars were still shining brightly in the sky and the others were still asleep. She noticed that Saraynea was no longer next to her. For a moment she was afraid that the corruption had caused her to run off again, but after quickly glancing around, she saw Saraynea sitting under a space where the trees did not block the sky. She slowly stood up and joined her friend.

"The stars feel so close out here." Saraynea said without turning her head. "Hototo said that if I ever felt lost, I should just let the stars guide me."

"Does it work?" Feleine asked. Saraynea softly laughed before turning for a moment toward Feleine.

"I never understood what he meant. Apparently they're connected to the spirit realm though."

"Why don't you just ask him to explain it to you then?"

"I've been struggling to feel connected to him since Darkstorm forced this corruption into me." Saraynea frowned at the sky. "It's like it's blocking me from the spirits. I don't like it and I'm scared for Hototo. He's been doing a lot of fighting lately."

"Fighting? In the spirit realm?"

"Remember that water spirit that I purified that day? Well, something like that is happening in the spirit realm."

"That seems important. Kheiryn said something about Darkstorm making his corruption from the essence of dark spirits. Do you think they're related somehow?" Feleine asked.

"They might be which can be very important to solving the problems Hototo and I have been having lately."

"You two haven't thought that your problems could be related?"

"Well, we haven't been able to talk much."

"Yeah I guess. The last time we saw him was when he came and helped us."

"That was the last time *you* saw him. We talk when I sleep, but since the nightmares, I feel like our connection is blocked. I guess that's why I thought I'd try looking to the stars for guidance." Saraynea let out a sad sigh and looked up again.

"We'll restore that connection soon. I promise." From the corner of her eye, Saraynea saw Feleine holding out her pinky, and she accepted the promise.

"Thanks." Saraynea said.

Kheiryn led the team toward the mountain where she believed another shaman may have lived. Still being new after recently deciding to leave the Darkstorm Clan, most of the team was still unsure of her, especially Korramaru who always had her eyes on the newcomer while Feleine was forced to trust her with the hope that she could lead them to helping cure Saraynea. The first stretch up the mountain path was wide and the trees slowly thinned.

"I can feel your gaze piercing through me. Everything alright, dear?" Kheiryn asked without turning. Knowing exactly who she was talking to, Korramaru quickly replied.

"If anything strange happens, my blades will be heading your way."

"If something unexpected happens, I'd hope that you'll at least attack *them* first since I'll be trying to help protect us."

"Yeah we'll see who does the protecting." Korramaru lowly growled. Sensing her building rage, Stormfang shivered and lowered his body even though he walked behind her. Suddenly Kheiryn stopped and shadow tendrils emerged from her back to tie everyone up, including wrapping around their muzzles. They were frozen from surprise except for Korramaru who struggled with all her strength.

"Shh!" Kheiryn glanced behind her before turning toward the path again. Three members of the clan walked around the corner of the path and stared at Kheiryn for a moment.

"Kheiryn, we hoped we'd meet up with you here." One said.

"What is it?" the moon bear asked.

"We were sent to receive an update from you to return to Darkstorm." Another said.

"Seeing that you've managed to capture and imprison them all, it seems that our message will come with some gifts. I'm sure he would like some prisoners." Another member said.

"You're strength and cunning are what makes you such a reliable member to

the clan." The last praised before they approached, but Kheiryn spread her wings to block them from walking passed her.

"Funny thing about the whole 'reliable to the clan' statement... I don't serve him anymore."

"W-what? You can't be serious!"

"Even if you are, you know the penalty for betrayal!"

"I know just as much as you do. I dare him to come and find me." Kheiryn's tendrils released the team and quickly grabbed the clan members. She slammed them into each other in the air before throwing them down toward the trees. With the threat gone, she looked over her shoulder to smile at them before continuing along the upward path. While they were surprised at what just happened, they knew what she had done had helped them. After exchanging shrugs and confused expressions, the rest of the team followed.

"I guess this is it." Mynh said as they saw a small house in a clearing where the terrain leveled off. In front of the house sat a male brown bear though he made no sign of knowing they were there.

"Hello?" Achamaru called out.

"Is he asleep?" Ayumei questioned.

"If he decided to sleep, why not go into the house right behind him?" Feleine said.

"Are you a shaman?" Saraynea asked. "We could really use your help if you are."

"What's this guy's deal?" Korramaru began to walk toward him.

"Maybe we should just wait. We don't even know for sure who he is." Achamaru suggested.

"Hey! Why won't you answer us? We're kind of in a bad situation and we need the help of a shaman. Even if you're not one, it'd be nice if you can at least guide us in the right direction." Korramaru said close to his face.

"Korramaru, also known as The Bladed Dragon to your fans. You've traveled to many places searching for your place in the world which is why you can never settle down in one place for too long." The male suddenly said without opening his eyes.

"How did you know that?" Korramaru asked in a low voice.

"The spirits told me. They're all around us even if you can't always see them. They watch us, studying us just as we try to do with them."

"So, you are a shaman then?" Achamaru asked. "What's your name?" He opened his eyes and stared at her for a moment.

"My name is not important. What is important is why you are here. Your friend has become inflicted with a powerful corruption. I can help you." He stood up, his brown fur slightly bristling as he stared at Saraynea, who seemed distracted by something as her eyes kept darting around.

"What are you looking at?" Feleine asked.

"A spirit." She said and continued to looks at the large beautiful hippogryph stood next to the bear. "Your name is Earthfur."

"I don't see anything." Ayumei said.

"Spirits can hide themselves from sight by staying in-between the spirit realm and our realm. Since we have a strong connection to all of the elements, usually shamans can see them more easily." Saraynea explained.

"You understand the spirits well." Earthfur praised.

"I was practically raised by them." Saraynea replied.

"Come inside." Earthfur allowed all of them inside his home, though it quickly became cramped in the one room building. He had Saraynea lie in the bed while he pressed his paw against her stomach. "This is powerful and dark but, I can remove it. Are any of you healers?"

"I can help." Kheiryn knelt next to him by the bed.

"It is very important that both of you are prepared for this. The process will be extremely painful and if you don't provide enough healing, it may kill her."

"Wait, this might *kill* her?" Feleine asked.

"The corruption isn't just sitting there because that is where it was placed. It's clinging to the weak spot as if with claws deeply embedded to the core of the wound. I'm going to grab it and rip it out which will cause a lot of internal bleeding." Earthfur explained before turning to Kheiryn. "Which is why you need to keep your focus."

"Is there a way less deadly than this?" Feleine's voice was full of worry.

"Can we just do this?" Saraynea asked. "I think I've heard enough of what you're going to do. I'd like to just get it over with now."

"Sara, are you sure?"

"Don't worry, Feleine. Kheiryn's energy is so strong that it emits from her body. I know she can handle this." When Saraynea was ready, Earthfur formed arches of strong earth to hold her down on the bed and Kheiryn's wings began to glow a bright gold. As soon as they began, a dark sludge wrapped around Earthfur's large paw as he tried to pull it from Saraynea's body. She screamed and tried to struggle under the earthen binds while Kheiryn focused on healing the damage that was being done as the corruption tried to cling to her. The others took a step back as her suffering was worse than they thought it would have been. The more of the sludge Earthfur pulled from her stomach, the brighter Kheiryn's wings shined as she increased her healing to the wound. When the last of the corruption was removed, Earthfur trapped it in a ball of wind in his paw, the purple and black glob bubbled as if giving off a sense of rage from being removed from its host.

"This will take a powerful cleansing rune to purify. Your friend will be fine now." He said as he took the corruption outside to prepare a cleansing area for it. The rock restraints freed Saraynea, allowing her to lean up. With the job done, Kheiryn stood up and her golden wings turned black again.

"Are you ok?" Feleine asked.

"Actually, I feel much better!" Saraynea's energy surprised her friends. "As horrible as it was when he was removing it, I feel great now!"

"I'm glad that's over." Feleine sighed.

"That's one problem out of the way." Mynh added.

"Now that she's all better, where do we go from here?" Achamaru turned toward Korramaru.

"I guess wherever she wants to go from here. I was just supposed to help guide everyone through the mountains. Since I'm already on a new adventure, I might as well keep going along with this team."

"I have an idea, though it may not be a favorable one." Kheiryn said.

"What is it?" Saraynea questioned.

"I hate to end the celebration, but Darkstorm isn't going to stop hunting you just because his little corruption idea failed. For how long have you already been running from him?"

"I think I know where this is going." Korramaru smiled at the idea. "You want to go after him and end this for good."

"What!? You want us to go after him now?" Feleine asked. "That rogue and mage have proven to be enough trouble and the one time we even saw Darkstorm, he nearly killed her!"

"You're right in a way there, Feleine. Fighting him now could be a bad idea, which is why I'm going to train to become stronger." Saraynea said.

"You can't be serious! If his main goal this whole time has been to capture you, then why would we go looking for him?"

"I'm tired of running, Feleine. I was running from them before we even met. If I can become stronger, then I wouldn't have to fear that clan so much. It may seem like an intimidating battle right now, but if I can train and become stronger, I can be more helpful in our fights against the clan."

"Seems like a good idea, though there's one problem: finding a master shaman to train you might prove to be a long journey alone." Mynh explained.

"You're right about that." Earthfur agreed as he stepped into his home.

"I was thinking that *you* could train me." Saraynea asked.

"What!?" Earthfur snapped at her. "And what makes you think that I'd even say yes to such a request?"

"Well why not? I need someone to train me. I've never had any training other than from what I've learned from spirits."

"Peh! Look, I already did you a huge favor as a shaman helping out another shaman. I live in the woods out here for a reason: for peace and quiet away from the madness of the world out there. Instead of fighting with others out there, I repair the damage they create. I'm sure the spirits will be able to guide you somewhere else for training."

Earthfur stood outside his home while his visitors walked toward the path leading back to the forest. Saraynea slowed down and let the others walk passed

her. Feleine turned to ask what was wrong when Saraynea suddenly turned and threw a bolt of lightning when Earthfur's back was turned. The sparks danced across his body, though he did not flinch or express any signs of pain from being struck.

"I already told you that I'm not interested in training you!" he yelled without turning. Feleine tried to reach for her enraged friend when a paw gripped her shoulder.

"She got herself into this mess. We'd better get out of the way." Achamaru suggested and they joined the others at a safer distance.

"Why is she attacking him after he helped her?" Ayumei asked.

"She's trying to convince him." Korramaru replied. "If she can prove to be a strong enough student, there's a chance that he might change his mind about training her." Earthfur threw several chunks of rock that came close to the group, but Ayumei created an arcane shield to protect them.

"Maybe we should get back to the camp." Achamaru suggested.

"And just leave her here?" Feleine questioned with worry.

"Don't worry too much, dear." Kheiryn said. "This isn't a duel to the death. She just might get a little beat up, but I can fix her up when she returns to camp. It's not like we can do anything to help her in this situation anyway."

Earthfur sensed that Saraynea was charging more lightning in her paws and turned to face her. When she released the energy, he reached out and caught it in his own paws. After waiting a few moments and seeing that she stayed in a fighting pose, he threw the lightning back at her, though she managed to avoid it. Before she could counter-attack, she was forced to dodge the large rock clusters that Earthfur threw at her.

"The spirits taught you well how to dodge, but you can't keep it up forever!" he growled and he increased the size of his attacks. One of the rocks struck Saraynea's shoulder, causing her to stumble and lose her rhythm and get struck by more of his attacks. After taking enough hits, Saraynea fell to the ground and Earthfur stopped his attacks. A deep growl formed in his throat when Saraynea slowly stood up again and did her best to hold her body so she could keep fighting. "Stay down!" he ordered and a powerful gust of wind pushed her over again, but right away she tried to stand again. "You're already this badly

hurt and you can't even get close to me. Why do you continue to get up?" he said as he threw another gust to knock her over while pushing her even further away.

"I won't give up that easily!" Saraynea yelled back as she knelt on her paws and knees. Before she could even try to stand again, Earthfur stomped his foot, causing a pillar to erupt from below her, sending her off of the ground before using wind to push her back down with a lot of force. "I have to become stronger!" she cried out as tears began to run down her cheeks. "I have to learn how to fight better! Every day my friends risk their lives to keep me safe, but I have to be able to watch their backs too. They're like a family to me. If anything ever happens to them, I would never forgive myself! I guess you wouldn't understand though since you live out here with no one to look after." Saraynea froze when she lifted her head and saw Earthfur sitting in front of her.

"You got that scar on your stomach from protecting one of them, didn't you?"

"Yeah." She answered as she slowly lifted herself into a sitting position.

"You know just throwing yourself in front of attacks is foolish. If you just take an attack without any strategy to counter it, you'll just get yourself killed. However, that is very brave of you and it proves how much you care for the family that you have made for yourself. You're skills need a lot of work, but if you stay this determined, hopefully you'll prove to be a fast learner."

"So, you'll train me?" Saraynea almost did not believe what she was hearing.

"Hurry back to your camp and rest. We start tomorrow morning."

"Where does it hurt most?" Kheiryn asked as Saraynea lie on her stomach.

"Everywhere." she whined. Kheiryn smiled in amusement and pressed her paw to Saraynea's back to heal her minor scratches and aching mucles.

"I'm still surprised he changed his mind, but I guess it's better to just be happy about it. You seem quite exhausted for this being your first day of training though." Feleine laughed.

"At least I know there aren't any written tests." Saraynea replied.

"Written test? A true test of skill is through dueling!" Korramaru cheered as she drew her blades from her own excitement.

"Easy there, *bladed dragon*." Achamaru started. "Not everyone thinks of fighting every few minutes."

"Hey, I didn't earn that name for nothing. It's just been so long since I've had a good fight! Maybe Sara will be able to show us some awesome new moves from her training."

"I guess I could perform the moves, but I'd rather not fight you." Saraynea said.

"Aw come on! Doesn't anyone feel like helping me out here?" Korramaru whined.

"Sorry, I just hate the thought of fighting my friends." Saraynea said.

"I can help you get rid of all that built-up energy." Kheiryn offered as she split her wings into the shadow tendrils.

"No! We are not going through that again!" Korramaru said with some fear mixed into her expression.

"I'll duel with you." Achamaru drew her sword and prepared her shield. "It might be more satisfying for you to actually be able to hit something like my shield anyway."

"Well, at least I offered." Kheiryn reformed her wings before making herself comfortable against a tree. "If anyone gets any scratches or bruises, I'm here."

"It's really nice to have a healer with us now!" Ayumei cheered.

"It'll be even better if Feleine can learn how to control her healing abilities too." Mynh added.

"You're a healer as well?" Kheiryn turned to Feleine.

"It just kind of happened. I have no idea how though. I never knew I even could heal until recently." Feleine replied.

"Oh really? I thought that maybe you were the one who had partially healed the wound in Saraynea's abdomen."

"What do you mean? The only things we've been able to do for her wound was apply bandages to keep it clean." Feleine explained.

"When I was healing her earlier, I was able to sense the wound and how deep it was inside her. The damage was worse at the very core of the injury, but it felt like it had been somewhat mended. I would have tried to heal it more, but it took a lot of energy to keep her from bleeding internally from that procedure."

"I was kind of passed out at the time so I'd have no idea." Saraynea said. "But it happened before we met anyone else, so it must have been you." She turned to Feleine.

"Just because you recently *noticed* that you can heal doesn't mean you were never able to prior to finding out." Kheiryn said. "There's a good chance that you somehow healed her, though it's interesting that you would have managed to concentrate the healing so deep into the wound as a novice, but you very well may have saved her life in that moment."

Saraynea breathed heavily and her muscles burned, but she kept her stance and prepared for Earthfur's next attack while being blinded by the cloth that covered her eyes. Protecting her paws were large metal claws that covered them like a strong flexible glove. Her friends observed from a safe distance on the flat land surrounded by the steep walls. It had been several weeks since her first training session and her friends enjoyed watching her skills improve so quickly. Earthfur formed several spikes from the ground and quickly launched them at her. As if the blindfold was not even there, Saraynea quickly reacted using what she felt from the earth in her feet and what she heard from the wind. When they first started using the blindfold, she was often hit and scratched up from the attacks, but as she began to trust the elements more, her reaction time and accuracy at countering his attacks improved. She did not move right away as the spikes neared her, but waited for them to become close enough before forming a wind current that caught them and sent them back toward Earthfur who smashed them to pebbles with his own metal claws before he charged at her. Their metal claws clashed together with a loud clang before they began to strike and dodge in close fast-paced combat. The claws suddenly clashed and they both pushed with all their force, though Earthfur was still much stronger and soon Saraynea's legs weakened and she was forced to the ground on her paws and knees.

"That's enough for today." Earthfur said through his gasps. "Go to the cold spring and get cleaned up. I will see you again tomorrow." He finished and he walked toward the opening of the flat area that led back to his home. Without replying due to her exhaustion, Saraynea stood up and removed the cloth from

her eyes before slowly meeting up with her friends.

"You've gotten a lot stronger. I'm impressed." Feleine praised as she sat on the cool floor of the cave while Saraynea soaked her tired body.

"It feels just as exhausting even though I don't get banged up as much." Saraynea replied before dunking her head below the water to wash the dust and sweat from her hair. "Remember the first day I had to wear the blindfold? I got hit by everything." She laughed.

"That's because he always ends your lessons when you reach that point. You don't realize it because you're so into the fight, but you can keep going for much longer than you used to."

"I guess I do just keep at it until my muscles give out on me. Can you do me a favor? I'm really tired and my muscles are killing me. Can you massage my shoulders now instead of when we get back to camp? I just want to sleep when we get back there." Saraynea said as she placed her chin on her arms at the edge of the pool. While still sitting, Feleine placed her feet in the water.

"It's freezing! I don't know how you jump right in here every day." Feleine said as she quickly undressed and neatly placed her clothes away from the edge so they would not get wet. Not wanting to stare at her friend, Saraynea turned her head and giggled at the sounds Feleine made as she slowly forced herself into the cold water.

"I appreciate you braving the cold water for me." Saraynea said as she pulled her long red hair away from her back.

"Yeah, well, that's what best friends are for." Feleine replied before starting to massage Saraynea's shoulders.

"I'll ask Kheiryn to heal me when I wake up from my nap." She said. Feleine silently thought about how Kheiryn usually healed by finding where she was most hurt. For a few quiet moments, Saraynea enjoyed the feeling of her aching muscles being massaged. Feleine suddenly slowed as she tried to focus on attempting to heal Saraynea instead so she would feel better faster.

"You ok?" Saraynea asked.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry, I just got distracted for a moment."

"I don't care if you want to try to practice your healing."

"I have no idea what I'm doing anyway."

"Why don't you ask Kheiryn for some help?"

"She's a priestess and I'm a monk. Our energy is just different."

"I'm sure she'd be able to at least give you some basic tips or something. If you don't ask, I will." Saraynea turned her head and stared at Feleine who had a serious expression on her face.

"Oh really?" she asked as she pressed her claws into Saraynea's fur and ran them down her back, causing her body to strongly twitch as she fought back a squeal. "Maybe I'll tell Kheiryn about your back?"

"Ok, ok I won't tell her! I don't think I could go through what Korramaru did." Feleine laughed at Saraynea's comment before continuing to massage her shoulders.

As they had been doing since Saraynea's training began, the team ventured up the mountain path where the small house was, except that Earthfur was not waiting for them outside.

"Maybe he went to the training area already?" Achamaru guessed.

"For wanting us to be up so early, it's odd for him to not be here." Mynh said.

"I don't see him inside." Ayumei said after peering into the windows. Knowing for sure that he was not at his home, the only other place they thought he would be was the training grounds, but when they arrived, it was quiet and empty.

"Now this is just getting really strange." Korramaru said.

"His spirit partner is here." Saraynea said as she stared at the hippogryph that only she could see.

"Is it saying anything?" Kheiryn asked.

"No, but I think he wants me to follow him. Stay here." Saraynea said and she approached the spirit who quietly turned and began to lead her toward a bunch of large rocks. Walking around them revealed steps that lead into a rocky passage. She continued to follow the spirit up the snowy stone steps which lead to another flat area with grass and snow. Saraynea quietly sat down next to Earthfur.

"This is a good place to meditate and think. I'm sorry that you and your friends came all the way up here, but maybe we will skip training for today." He said.

"Is there something wrong?" Saraynea asked.

"It's not that something is wrong, it's just that recently memories have been returning to me. Memories that bring up a lot of questions that I cannot find answers for."

"Hototo tells me to look to the stars when I'm confused."

"That's your spirit partner? Where did his advice lead you?"

"When the clan members refused to give up on chasing me everywhere I went, I began to follow a certain star pattern. It seems that I always end up running up mountains."

"What did you find on the mountain?"

"Right after that, I met Feleine."

"Hm. Good advice then."

"Maybe you should try it? Maybe your journey will be less tiring as mine has been." Saraynea tried to lighten the mood with a small joke.

"I believe I know where the stars would lead me, but I don't know if I should return there. It's a long story." he sat quietly for a moment before sighing. "You're not going to move unless I tell you." he said. Saraynea shifted her body into a more comfortable position to listen to the story. "Years ago, I was a wanderer. I just wanted to travel and see new places, just me and my hippogryph spirit. I stopped at a small but lovely town that housed its princess in a beautiful temple. I decided to rest there for longer than I usually stop in one place. I just had a feeling that something was there. I ended up running into a female with a strong spiritual connection."

"You happened to run into a shaman in a crowded place like that?"

"M-hm. She was so beautiful and sweet and had a bit of mischief about her. Though our time together was short, we connected right away. We thought about the fact that when two shamans mate, the chances of the cub being one is increased. I later found out that she was the princess."

"At least you fell in love with her *before* knowing that she was a princess."

"Yes, well, while our attraction was true, it just couldn't work. A princess could never choose a wanderer for a mate. They can only marry others of royal blood."

"Please don't tell me that's the end! You fought for her right?"

"Well, I didn't really have to fight."

"You actually mated with her?"

"Look, she was the one who snuck out of the temple and into my room at the inn!"

"What happened after that? Did they banish you?"

"No one else knew. I wanted to stay with her so badly, but I was too scared."

"Scared of what? If she went to you, why would she try to get you into trouble?"

"Part of the problem was that she didn't want to get me into trouble, but she couldn't exactly help the fact that she became pregnant."

"If she was having your cub, then why are you out here all alone? Did something happen to her?" Saraynea was almost afraid to ask.

"When she told me, I was just as happy as I was concerned. The cub was not of pure royal blood. It was a wild cub belonging to neither the royals nor the common bears. If anyone found out, not only would she be in a lot of trouble, but I would likely have been executed and the cub would have been lucky if banishment was its punishment."

"That's harsh."

"The reasoning is that if the cub lived, it would be a reminder that the royal bloodline has a fault in it which is looked down on by other royals."

"What did you do then? What did she even do as the princess?"

"I left as soon as she told me and she used the cover of saying that it belonged to a prince who was trying to earn her paw in marriage, though she did not care for him much and refused to choose him for a mate."

"Wouldn't it have been safer for the cub if she had though?"

"Gah! Didn't your parents ever teach you about choosing a mate!?"

"Oh, sorry. And no, I never knew my parents. I was an orphan."

"I see. Sorry, that must have been hard."

"It's ok. What were you saying though?"

"I'm not sure about other places, but bears in this land only choose one mate for life. The only thing that could ever part them is death, and even that's only a temporary separation before they reunite in the afterworld. Even though we haven't been together in years, we are still mates. I would never be with another female as she would never be with another male. Of course this complicates some things for her since she will end up being an unmarried princess."

"So, she just continues to rule with the cub?"

"I assume so. I never returned to the town."

"Not even to visit? Do you even know the gender of your cub?"

"No idea. I don't visit in case our secret is found out."

"But you clearly think of them huh?"

"I think of them, but the distance hasn't bothered me in a long time. Seeing a young shaman again reminded me of when I first met her."

"Oh I understand now. It's ok if we don't train today, but when we do finish my lessons, I highly recommend that you visit that town again. I'm sure she thinks of you too. The only difference is that you can go back where she cannot leave to look for you." Saraynea said as she stood up.

"You've been working hard and my head is so full of thoughts that it almost hurts. Maybe we should go on a little trip. I can guide your friends to a town further into the woods. It's a nice little place."

"I'm sure they'll really appreciate it. Thank you Master Earthfur." She said and bowed politely. He seemed surprised at her gesture, but bowed as well so to not disrespect her.

## Part 8

Everyone shared the same excitement and comforting feeling as they walked over the border of the town. They were greeted by bears with excited eyes when they realized that adventurers were visiting.

"Everyone is so friendly!" Achamaru said.

"This is a quiet town. Most of the bears living here enjoy when travelers come by with tales of their adventures." Earthfur said.

"I'd love to get my blade sharpened." Achamaru said.

"Good idea. I'll join you." Korramaru agreed.

"I'd go too if I had anything that needed to be sharpened." Ayumei said.

"I think a clothing store is more our style." Kheiryn said.

"I like the idea of a new robe! Maybe a nice fancy belt to go with it too!"

"What do you want to do?" Feleine asked to Saraynea.

"I'm hungry. Mynh you want to join us at the tavern?" Saraynea asked.

"I don't have any other plans at the moment." Mynh replied and the trio made their way to the tavern which was busy and full of customers. "Huh, busy place."

"That only means that the food is awesome!" Saraynea said excitedly. "I can't wait to eat some real food! I want a nice big bowl of soup and plenty of dumplings!" in her excited rant, Saraynea bumped into another red panda holding a tray of food. She used her wind ability to carefully hold the wobbling dishes, preventing anything from spilling. "I'm so sorry!" she said as her cheeks turned red with embarrassment.

"Wow, you're a shaman?" the young red male said.

"Y-yeah." she replied shyly.

"Sorry, I don't mean to be nosy. I'd like to hear any stories if you have any, but that'll have to wait since I'm still working right now." He smiled and walked to a nearby table and set down the tray.

While Feleine and Mynh happily ate, Saraynea kept her gaze on the kitchen where the male she bumped into was working hard preparing food.

"I thought you were starving." Feleine said.

"Oh, sorry." Saraynea said as she realized that she was ignoring her friends. Mynh softly laughed. "What?"

"Sara, you're blushing." Mynh playfully snickered.

"My cheeks are always red. I have red fur."

"Only your upper cheeks are normally red." Feleine said. "You like him don't you?"

"What are you talking about?" Saraynea tried to hide her embarrassment.

"You keep looking at the cook. You know, the guy you crashed into as soon as we walked in." Feleine teased, causing Saraynea's face to burn up.

"It was an accident." Saraynea placed her paw on her forehead, trying to hide part of her face behind her arm.

"Why don't you try to talk to him?" Mynh suggested. "Or at least find out his name."

"Talk to him? I don't even know what to say to him! I'm sure his coworkers will call his name at some point."

"Since when are you shy?" Feleine questioned, since she was used to being the one in such a position.

"We're just playing around. You should really eat to help your body recover from your training with Earthfur." Mynh said. Happy that the teasing was over, Saraynea continued to eat.

After their stomachs were filled, the trio decided to take a walk around the town. They wondered away from the busy shopping area toward a quiet and beautiful lake area. They stopped to rest near some trees along the side of the path. While Saraynea and Mynh talked, Feleine's ears turned when she heard voices from behind her. She turned and saw the cook from the tavern walking with another bear who was pulling a cart.

"Thanks again for helping me fix that wheel, Huo. I really appreciate it." The cart owner said.

"It was no trouble at all! I enjoy helping out whenever I can." The cook replied and they began to walk in the opposite direction on the path. Huo was walking right toward them.

"What are you looking at Feleine?" Saraynea asked.

"Oh, nothing. Hey, we're best friends, right?" Feleine asked as she placed her arm around Saraynea's shoulders.

"Well, yeah. Why do you ask?"

"Please don't hate me for this."

"For what?" Instead of giving a verbal response, Feleine turned Saraynea to face the path and placed her foot in front of Saraynea's before giving her a hard shove.

"Woah there! Are you alright?" Huo asked as he helped to catch Saraynea from falling.

"I think so. I'm really sorry." Saraynea froze when she looked up and saw that she had bumped into the cook again.

"Oh, it's you again!" he said with a friendly smile.

"Hi." Saraynea said in a low shy voice.

"Really though, are you ok? That was quite a fall you were about to take." He asked with concern.

"Oh, uh, yeah." Saraynea moved so that when he faced her, he was not looking toward where her friends were hiding. "I was walking and I tripped over something." Her tone was more serious as she finished. Leaning to look behind him toward the trees, she saw Mynh and Feleine waving at her.

"My name is Huo by the way."

"I'm Sara. Well, that's short for Saraynea, but my friends call me Sara. Most of them at least." From their hiding place, Feleine and Mynh placed their paws on their foreheads and shook their heads.

"You talk a lot when you're nervous huh?" Huo questioned.

"Nervous? I'm not that nervous. I guess." Saraynea tried to cover her face with one of her paws and sighed, lowering her gaze to the ground as her face began to burn again.

"Sorry. We're so used to greeting travelers that sometimes we forget that you may not be as comfortable as we are to say hi." Saraynea slowly looked up at him, but had no idea what to say. She expected him to have an expression of confusion toward her behavior, but instead he seemed calm. "I'll let you get back to that walk. I'm sure I'll see you around again Saraynea." Huo said and he continued to walk along the path behind Saraynea.

"You really enjoy putting me through immense embarrassment, don't you?" she said as she walked up to Feleine and Mynh.

"I have a feeling that he kind of likes you too." Mynh said.

"You just have to work up some courage for next time is all." Feleine said.

"I don't really want there to be a next time! My face feels like it's on fire!"

"We're not giving up that easily." Feleine said.

"If you really like him, you might as well try to at least become friends with him." Mynh suggested.

"I doubt that. He must think I'm so weird. I just froze and I don't know why. It certainly didn't help that I was thrown into him like that." Saraynea glared at Feleine.

"I couldn't think of anything else." Feleine said as she wrapped her arms around Saraynea, but she did not return the hug. "Are you mad?"

"I guess not really. I don't think I could even stay mad at you for too long." Saraynea said as hugged Feleine back. "Just give me a warning next time."

"I'll think about it." Feleine answered.

"I kind of liked the outcome with no warning." Mynh laughed.

"I thought for sure that Korramaru was going to beat him up." Achamaru laughed as she told the story to the team as they were hanging out in the same room at the inn.

"I should have! He had no idea how to sharpen blades!" Korramaru said.

"If she didn't beat him up, what did she do? She likes to take action after all." Feleine asked.

"She jumped the counter." Achamaru answered.

"What?" Saraynea asked as she burst into laughter.

"I'm serious! She jumped the counter and showed him how to sharpen blades." Achamaru said, causing everyone to laugh.

"Come on, you know I did a better job than he could have!" Korramaru said.

"Hopefully you scared him into doing it the right way from now on." Kheiryn said.

"I wish I was there to see that!" Ayumei laughed.

"Me too!" Saraynea agreed.

"We were too busy having our own little adventure." Feleine said.

"Oh really? What did you end up doing?" Kheiryn asked.

"Nothing." Saraynea quietly answered as she sat on the bed.

"Oh, I know she's hiding something with that tone." Korramaru teased.

"Someone fell in love today." Mynh smiled at Saraynea.

"It's not that big of a deal." Saraynea grabbed a pillow and buried her face in it.

"She gets really shy around him." Feleine said as she sat on the bed with Saraynea.

"Aw I think that's sweet." Kheiryn said.

"You're usually one of the more outgoing personalities of this team." Achamaru said.

"I guess everyone has that little weakness." Kheiryn said before staring at Korramaru for a moment. "I discovered Korramaru's rather quickly."

"What are you talking about?" Korramaru asked, causing Kheiryn to unravel her wings.

"You just caught me off-guard that time." Korramaru said. Kheiryn smirked and slowly reached toward her with her tendrils, causing Korramaru to slowly side-step away, but Kheiryn suddenly wrapped two tendrils around each of her wrists. "Alright, alright! I didn't even do anything this time!"

"See?" Kheiryn said as she glanced back to Saraynea who was giggling with amusement before turning back to Korramaru whose face had turned red. With her paws still trapped, she stuck out her tongue, but her expression quickly changed from grumpy to fearful when more tendrils moved toward her. She bit her lip to try to hide the smile that formed from her anxiety.

"You two have such an interesting friendship. I've never seen such opposites work together in the same team." Achamaru said.

The next day, Saraynea and Feleine were sitting on a bench after taking a walk around the town. Saraynea glanced around at all the different bears walking around when one caught her attention. An older female stared at her through the crowd as she leaned against a building.

"Do you see that bear staring at me?" she asked as she turned to Feleine.

"What? Where?"

"Across the path there's an elder staring at me for some reason."

"You mean the one standing right in front of you?" Feleine asked causing Saraynea to turn her head and gasp when she noticed the stranger leaning down and staring into her eyes with a very serious expression.

"Can I help you?" Saraynea asked.

"No, but I can help you."

"What do you mean?"

"Just sit still young one, I know what I'm doing." She ordered as she pressed two fingers against Saraynea's forehead. "M-hm, I see. Your mind is clear." She said and moved her fingers to Saraynea's heart. "Your heart is relaxed, that's good, very good, but there is a spark in there..." She said and moved her fingers over the scar on her stomach. "Uh-huh. Very serious, but fixable, though maybe not to one-hundred percent condition."

"What are you talking about?" Saraynea asked.

"Your health! What else?" her tone and expression were intimidating for an elder.

"Health? Are you a healer?" Feleine asked.

"Good job there Silver. Huh, silver fur yet you're so young. That's

interesting." She said and reached out with her two fingers again, but Feleine tried to lean back in the bench. "You're a twitchy one aren't ya?" she said and pressed her fingers on her forehead. "Well, I knew you were confused before I even touched you. Ah, but there is something else there, yes it's been there for a long time. A desire to learn, m-hm." she said and moved her fingers to Feleine's heart. "Very concerned I see, seemingly toward your friend here. Congratulations, Silver, you're a healer." She said as she backed away.

"Are you sure?" Feleine asked.

"I'm the best healer around! Of course I'm sure!" she snapped. "Name's Mistpaw. My assistant and I are the only healers this town has had for years. Besides, your heart is what told me. There was a strong connection from your heart to that desire to learn up in your head. I'll teach you to be a healer."

"Really? You can teach me?"

"Not only can I, but I will. I'm a healer and my job is to make sure everyone in town has a satisfied mind, heart, and healthy body. Come. You too Red." Mistpaw lead Feleine and Saraynea to a small building. The bowls of herbs and shelves of medicines and bandages revealed that they were in a healer's home. "Most importantly, you need to know how to examine the patient. If you have no idea what they need, how can you possibly fix their problems? Now pay attention!" Mistpaw took Feleine's paw and folded her fingers so that only two stuck out and pressed them against Saraynea's forehead. "The mind deals with personal troubles and desires. The heart deals with feelings toward others since the mind is too focused on itself. The stomach represents physical health. It will lead you to any injury on or in the body. Now, start from the beginning. What do you sense from her mind?" Mistpaw asked as she placed Feleine's fingers on Saraynea's forehead again and let go of her paw.

"Uhhh..."

"Don't think about it! Just *feel* it. You can't guess what she feels, so let her tell you. Your eyes won't help you either." Mistpaw placed a paw over Feleine's eyes, at first making her more nervous, but she soon found that having her vision blocked helped her focus more on what she felt.

"I'm not really feeling anything."

"Good job, novice. As your skills grow, you'll be able to dig in there deeper, but for now all you need to know is that you sense nothing, basically meaning

that her mind is calm. Now, read her heart." Mistpaw placed Feleine's fingers where they needed to be while her eyes were covered. Feleine spent a moment trying to focus on what she felt from her fingertips. Right away, she felt two sensations, one of which made her feel a strong comforting closeness and the other made her think of a dancing ember.

"As you practice, you'll start to learn what individual feelings represent. What you're sensing right now is that she is very comfortable and happy when with you and that she has a very strong attraction to someone." Mistpaw held Feleine's paw in place on Saraynea's stomach. She felt a strong sensation that made her stomach turn and caused the fur on her arm to stand. She wanted to pull away, but Mistpaw would not let her. She sensed a lot of damage and pain which made her upset to have a better idea of how badly Saraynea was hurting from the injury. "Relax." Mistpaw said as she knew right away that Feleine's eyes were tearing up. "Just focus. What do you want to do about that injury?" she asked. A thin flame began to form and disappear around Feleine's paw. Slowly, it became thicker as it turned to a jade color and began to absorb into Saraynea's stomach. Feleine began to struggle to focus on sensing the injury and became dizzy. "Enough. Sit down." Mistpaw said and helped Feleine to sit down on the floor where Saraynea joined her.

"You ok?" Saraynea asked.

"Yeah. I just got really dizzy for some reason."

"Your healing energy ran low. You're only starting out, so you're quite limited, but with a lot of practice and dedication, your pool of energy will grow, allowing you to not only heal for longer, but it will increase the strength of the healing. As long as you keep practicing, you'll get better. It's that simple." Mistpaw explained as she handed Feleine a cup of juice. "There you have it: the basics of monk healing. Just go over the skills and we'll continue tomorrow."

"Master Mistpaw!" a voice called as a young female entered the room. "Oh...I didn't realize you had patients." She said as she noticed Saraynea and Feleine.

"We're just about done here. What is it?" Mistpaw asked.

"You won't believe who I just found!" she said happily and pulled on the arm of the bear behind her.

"Oh, hi Mynh. What are you doing here?" Saraynea greeted.

"After I met up with Softear, I knew Mistpaw was here too. She taught me everything I know about medicine and herbs." Mynh said.

"So you came back!" Mistpaw said in a serious tone as she approached Mynh, whose expression seemed confused that her old teacher did not seem as excited to see her. "What took you so long to visit us!?" she roared and punched the top of Mynh's head, nearly forcing her to her knees in pain as she placed her paws on her head.

"I would have come back sooner, but I never knew the name of this town. I had no idea how to return after I left." Mistpaw snorted in response before quickly pulling Mynh into a hug.

"I'm so happy for you! A master healer! How lucky." Saraynea cheered.

"Yeah, though I still feel like it was just as strange as it was lucky." Feleine said.

"The introduction was a little awkward sure, but I guess she liked you if she wants you to go back tomorrow."

"Mistpaw has an excellent sense for seeing potential in students." Mynh said.

"She seems like a good master. I went from having no idea how to heal from knowing how to sense emotions and injuries. At least, kind of." Feleine turned to Mynh. "How did you meet her in the first place?"

"Remember how Venomclaw tried to kill me with poison? When I escaped, I became really sick and Mistpaw and Softear found me and took care of me. While I was with them, they began to teach me about herbs and how to use them to make medicines."

"Aw that's so sweet! If you managed to learn that much, I'm sure she'll be able to teach you to be a great healer in no time!" Saraynea said to Feleine and started to trip as she did not notice the stone steps before her.

"Hopefully one of these days we can see each other when you're not about to fall." Huo said after he caught Saraynea.

"Hi...Huo."

"I'm glad we did run into each other though. Are you doing anything later today?" he asked.

- "Me? Tonight?"
- "She doesn't have any plans." Feleine said.
- "Oh, good! I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner with me."
- "She'd love to." Mynh said before Saraynea could stutter on her words again.
  - "I'll prepare some extra food for you too." Huo said to Feleine and Mynh.
  - "You don't have to do that! It should be a fun night for you two." Mynh said.
- "No really! It's alright, I love to cook. Consider it a thank you." He said as he gave a grateful wink. "Meet me at the tavern after it's closed. I'll leave the door unlocked." Huo finished and he walked along the path behind them.
  - "Well, I'd say that went really well." Feleine said.
  - "I don't believe it." Saraynea said in a low voice.
  - "What?" Mynh asked.
- "He asked me out!" Saraynea cheered. "He doesn't think I'm weird for tripping all the time! He likes me!" She seemed unbothered by the redness on her face. When nighttime approached, Saraynea's mood quickly changed as her nerves grew. "I don't know. Maybe I should tell him I'm not feeling well."
  - "No way! Don't be nervous. You know he likes you." Feleine said.
  - "Well, I just kind of assumed, but he never actually stated that he likes me."
  - "He asked you to dinner. That's a pretty clear sign." Achamaru said.
  - "Darling, don't be so nervous. You should be excited." Kheiryn said.
  - "I am excited, but I'm nervous too."
- "Look, we have your back. If he does anything weird, just let us know and we'll chase him down." Korramaru smirked, causing Saraynea to laugh.
  - "Good idea, Korramaru." Kheiryn said.
- "Of course we're going to pick a fight with anyone who tries to mess with us!"
  - "No dear, not that! Making her laugh. It'll help her feel less stressed."
  - "Anyone know any good jokes?" Ayumei asked.

"I have a better idea." Feleine said as she clawed at Saraynea's sides until she backed up against the bed and fell onto her back as she continued to try to defend herself.

"I can help!" Ayumei said with excitement and she quickly stood up to the bed and joined in, causing Saraynea's laughter and struggling to intensify.

"Starting to feel better?" Achamaru asked, though she was not able to get an answer due to Saraynea being too busy with her struggle against Feleine and Ayumei who enjoyed their playful attack.

"Well, it worked for Korramaru, didn't it?" Kheiryn said.

"Why do you always bring that up?" Korramaru grumbled.

"Because I like your reaction." Kheiryn smiled while Korramaru sighed.

Saraynea stood in front of the doors to the tavern, which had been closed for a short while. She gently pushed on the door and as she expected, it was unlocked and slowly creaked open. She glanced around before entering and saw that one of the tables had been covered with plates and bowls of food. The aroma drew her inside and she closed the door behind her.

"Ah, perfect timing!" Huo said from the kitchen. "I never asked what you like to eat exactly so I just made a bunch of stuff." He said as he walked through the doorway from the kitchen and placed two more plates on the table.

"You really didn't have to make this much. It must have been a lot of work." Saraynea said as she approached the table.

"This? It was nothing. I enjoy cooking. I even started this feast a while ago. I was so excited when I started that I just couldn't stop." He said with a laugh.

"Excited? For what?"

"Seeing you again of course." He answered as he pulled out the seat for Saraynea before seating himself across the table. "How is it?" he asked as Saraynea slowly plucked a dumpling and took a bite.

"You're awesome! I mean, the food is awesome. You're a really talented cook." Saraynea placed the other half in her mouth to force herself from talking.

"Thank you. It means a lot. As travelers, I assume you eat in various places?"

"Well, not really to be honest. We mostly eat what we hunt or fish on our way between towns. We don't usually stay in one place for too long."

"Oh really? You move around a lot huh?"

"Sometimes I think that it'd be nice to stay in a town for longer so we can sleep in real beds and eat real food like this."

"Would you mind telling me some of your stories? The idea of adventure... it always sounded so exciting to me!"

"Sure. Where should I start?"

"Anywhere you'd like! Start at the very beginning if you want to. We have plenty of food to last a long story." Huo said with a smile. Saraynea decided to start her story from when she was a small cub at the orphanage where she first realized that had abilities that no one else did, which eventually led to her learning that she was a rare shaman. From there she told stories of when she lived in the forest with Hototo, who promised to protect her and teach her how to communicate with the spirits and how to control her powers. She talked about the first time she was chased by the Darkstorm clan and how running from them led to her finding Feleine which started a new chapter of adventures that would introduce her to all of her friends and how they travel together. No matter what she talked about, Huo kept his ears perked and his full attention on what she said. He never interrupted or asked questions. He just let her talk. "Wow. And it's all true? Even the clan that's looking for you?"

"It's the truth, though I wish some of the details were made up. What about you though? You seem to like the idea of adventure. Have you ever been outside of this town?"

"Me? Oh no! I've been here my whole life. I couldn't go on an adventure like that."

"Why not? You're so interested."

"My place is in the kitchen. I do like the idea of going out in the world and seeing other places, but I'm too afraid."

"Afraid? Yeah I guess that is a big part of adventure."

"Unlike you and your friends, I have no fighting skills. All I do is cook."

"If you'd like, I can introduce you to my friends. They have a lot of

different fighting styles and abilities. Maybe you can learn a thing or two from them." Saraynea suggested.

"That does sound interesting. I think I'd enjoy that. Maybe my fear comes from just not knowing how to fight."

"I'm sure you can learn a lot from them! Two of my friends are even healers. My best friend Feleine just recently found out so she's training with the town healer now to learn more."

"Hey maybe when I watch your friends fight, I can teach you a little about cooking! I mean, just plain unseasoned deer meat and fish? That has to get boring on a lengthy adventure. Food is important for moral after all."

"That's a great idea, especially since you've certainly proven that your skills in cooking are amazing." Saraynea took a long slurp of her noodles. When the date was over, Saraynea returned to the inn with the leftovers which her friends greatly appreciated.

The next afternoon, Saraynea found Huo and brought him not too far outside the town where the forest was. In a small clearing her friends were waiting for her. As promised, they were going to take turns dueling to try to teach Huo some fighting techniques while he sat next to Saraynea.

"Alright then, who wants to fight?" Korramaru asked. Kheiryn stepped forward.

"Don't worry. It'll be a real fight. I promise." She said.

"Ready?" Achamaru asked. Korramaru raised her blades while Kheiryn's wings split into shadow tendrils. "Begin!" Without any hesitation, Korramaru charged at Kheiryn who tried to keep her distance so that she could strike with her tendrils. After a timed match of a few minutes, Achamaru called out that the duel was finished. While it ended with a draw, Korramaru breathed much heavier than Kheiryn as they sat down to rest. "Will you fight?" Huo asked.

"I honestly prefer not to fight with them." Saraynea said quietly.

"Can I fight?" Ayumei asked.

"As long as you have a challenger." Achamaru replied.

"I'll fight if you'd like. I might be learning to heal, but I have to keep my fighting skills sharp as well." Feleine stepped into the fighting area with her staff in her paw. When the battle started, Ayumei threw several frostbolts at Feleine, who used the staff to smash them in the air, causing the icy shards to glisten like small icy fireworks. When she was close enough to strike, Ayumei suddenly teleported to behind Feleine and tossed a snowball at the end of the staff, freezing it and changing the weight, making it hard to use. Feleine quickly struck at a tree to break the ice before planting it into the ground to allow her to leap over Ayumei, but as soon as the staff touched the ground, Ayumei froze it. Feleine adjusted by preparing a kick instead, but right before her attack could land, Ayumei created a pillar of ice that trapped one of her feet while freezing the other to the ground. Struggling with her balance at an awkward angle, Feleine leaned back and held onto her staff. She was thankful that she was in the middle of a friendly duel instead of a fight against an enemy as she had a hard time trying to think of a way out of the ice traps.

"Wow, they're more talented than they look." Huo said. "Everyone should come to my house for dinner to replenish all the energy they're using."

"I'm sure they'd love that." Saraynea smiled. "Do you want any of them to try to personally show you some moves?" Saraynea glanced back at her friends. Kheiryn took advantage of Feleine's situation by stretching two tentacles to tickle at her exposed sides.

"They sure go from serious to goofy real fast." Huo said causing Saraynea to laugh.

"Yeah, but the same goes for the opposite as well. They're super reliable."

"I don't know if I should even try to fight. They might kill me by accident."

"What? No they won't."

"Maybe I could borrow the shield? Just in case." Huo lost all his confidence when he stood before Korramaru. She lent him her sword and shield and showed him some basic sword strikes. "J-just be easy on me ok? I've never fought anything before."

"I can't help but move fast, but I'll try to not swing as hard ok?" Korramaru smirked.

"Can you give me a warning before you?"

"Uh...if you really want me to, but that tactic will get you killed in a real fight. Just tell me when you're ready."

"Ok." He gulped. "I'm ready."

"Here I come then!" Korramaru yelled before raising one of her blades. Huo yelled out and stepped backward, tripping over a tree root and falling back into a bush. Korramaru stared at him. Her initial surprised expression turned into confusion. "You have a shield!"

"Sorry! I just got so scared. You're quite intimidating."

"Maybe up-close combat isn't his style?" Achamaru questioned as she turned to Mynh.

"I guess we can try." Mynh said and attempted to show him how to hold a bow after he had gotten up and brushed off the leaves from his clothes.

"I kind of like this. I can hit things from far away right?" He asked.

"Well, only if you can aim the arrow right. Now pull it back." She helped by adjusting his arm and elbow. "And make sure you hold on tight, otherwise it will slip..." Before she could finish, Huo had lost his grip on the arrow which landed in a tree. Korramaru, Feleine, and Ayumei slowly moved away from him.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Achamaru asked Saraynea.

"Maybe not." Saraynea replied. "Huo! Maybe we'll try more demonstrations before you actually practice with the weapons."

"Y-yeah I like that idea." Huo said as he handed the bow back to Mynh.

That night, the team visited Huo's home for dinner. He had prepared several meals for them before they had arrived.

"This is a lot of food." Achamaru said amazed at how much work Huo went through.

"Oh, I made some cookies for dessert too." Huo smiled.

"Hurry up and eat Sis! We have to get to desert! I want those cookies!" Ayumei ordered as she quickly began to eat.

"This was very generous of you. Thank you Huo." Kheiryn said.

"It was no trouble at all." Huo replied.

"I wouldn't mind staying here for a little longer if we get food this good more often." Korramaru said.

"If he comes with us, then we can continue our adventure *and* have great food!" Ayumei cheered as she stared at Huo with bright eyes.

"Go with you?" Huo found the idea to be very intriguing. "I don't know. I'm not a fighter like you all are. I'd just get in your way."

"I'm sure we'll still be here for a while." Saraynea said. "We have to stay while Feleine learns how to heal, so we have time to try to sharpen your skills."

As they continued to stay in the town, Feleine's healing skills continued to improve to where Mistpaw had even told her that she was almost finished with her novice training while Huo continued to struggle with his own training. At first Saraynea tried to cheer him on and support him, but she quickly found herself becoming more afraid that he'd get hurt, mostly from stumbling when trying to run away. Late into the night, Saraynea dreamt that Hototo was visiting her.

"I came to tell you something important." He started. "I was able to find a spirit who has some intelligence on what's been happening to the spirits that were taken from our realm. I'd like for you to come with me when you can." He said.

"We have to go back already?" Ayumei asked.

"Well, it's just Sara who has to go to the spirit realm, right?" Feleine said.

"From what I know, Darkstorm was targeting dark spirits and was creating his corruption from their energy." Kheiryn explained. "If there's any way that we can follow her into the spirit realm, we could all learn a lot all at once instead of her having to relay it all back."

"Actually, that is possible." Saraynea said.

"You mean you could bring us into the spirit realm even though we're not shamans?" Korramaru asked.

"Yes, but I've never taken others with me, so we'll need Earthfur's help to get you all safely there."

"If it can be done, I say we give it a shot." Mynh suggested.

"I guess we should return to Earthfur right away then." Feleine said. "I'll thank Mistpaw one last time. She said my healing abilities should be strong enough to support the group as we travel together." She turned to Saraynea. "You might want to talk to Huo."

"Yeah, I know." Saraynea was clearly upset about having to say good-bye to him.

"Hey, it's only for a little while. Once we finish dealing with the clan, we'll come back so you can talk to him again." Feleine said, causing Saraynea to smile from the comfort. She quickly searched for Huo and asked him to talk with her.

"What is it? Is everything alright?" he asked, seeing that she was upset.

"Yeah... Listen, I need to leave town for a while."

"Leave town? For how long?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. It could be a while though."

"You'll come back though, right?"

"I'd like to if you'd wait for me." Saraynea's cheeks turned red.

"Of course I'll wait for you."

"R-really?" she was a little surprised at his serious tone.

"Yes, but I'd still prefer if you come back sooner than later." He smiled.

"I'll try." She said and she hugged him. To her surprise, he kissed her cheek.

"Just be careful, ok? I know you're an adventurer and all, but it's still dangerous out there."

"I'll be careful and I will come back. I promise." She said as she nuzzled into his shoulder before returning to her friends to head back to Earthfur's home.

"You saw Mistpaw before we left right?" Saraynea asked to Mynh.

"Uh, yeah." Mynh replied.

"Did everything go ok?"

"Mistpaw has a tough exterior, but she hates long good-byes."

"Aw I think it's sweet that she still cares about you like that."

"She has an interesting way of showing it."

"Did she hit you again?" Feleine asked.

"She certainly tried to. Then she chased after me and said that if I take too long to visit again, she'll break my legs so I'll have to stay for a while."

"She wouldn't really do that though, right?" Saraynea asked. Mynh just gave her a serious stare in response. "Oh wow."

## Part 9

Early the next day, the group gathered and started to head back toward Earthfur's home along the mountain path. They had traveled further into the forest when they heard a voice calling to them. They all turned and saw Huo running up to them, carrying a massive backpack.

"Wait up!" he called. "I want to come with you!" he said as he stood before them.

"Huo..." Saraynea started. "It's too dangerous. You have no idea what we're up against on our current mission."

"No, I don't and I'm sure there will be times when I'll be scared out of my mind, but I want to be with you. I promise I won't get in the way! I packed all my cooking supplies, including some spices so I can prepare meals for you."

"I'm not as concerned about you being in the way as I am that you might get hurt if you come with us." Saraynea said.

"Sara, if I don't come with you, I know my mind will be haunted every day wondering when you'll be back. I want to come with you and help however I can."

"We know he's good at running, so if we get into trouble, I'm sure he'll be fine." Korramaru said.

"I agree that he should come with us. If he's worried about you, I'm sure you'll be worried about him as well while we're gone." Kheiryn said.

"We don't have time for this!" Saraynea began to feel stressed from the mix of emotions. "I promised Hototo that I'd join him in the spirit world as soon as possible."

"Then we better get moving." Huo said as he quickly lifted Saraynea and held her in his arms.

"Hey! Put me down Huo!" she ordered but he ignored her and began to walk with the others who tried to hide their laughter. Since Huo had heard a lot about their adventure from when he had his first date with Saraynea, he was able to quickly understand their plan to meet with Earthfur and have him help them

enter the spirit realm together.

"Aren't your arms tired?" Mynh asked to Huo since he still carried Saraynea even though they were nearing Earthfur's home.

"Not really. I'm used to carrying crates of ingredients that were delivered for the kitchen where I worked. Besides, it was a lot easier when she finally stopped struggling to get me to put her down." He answered.

"I have to admit, I wouldn't mind being carried around more often." Saraynea laughed. When they saw Earthfur sitting outside his home, Huo put her down and the group approached him to present their plan.

"I see." Earthfur said as he thought for a moment. "It is possible to get you all into the spirit realm. I'd just have to create and guard a rune that would be the doorway. Before we even begin this plan, though, you must understand the importance of staying close together. If any of you get separated and lost in the spirit realm, it won't be easy to get you back. Otherwise I can begin to create the rune as soon as you're ready." He explained. Everyone agreed to go to the spirit realm together except for Huo, who wanted to stay behind. When the rune was finished being drawn on the ground, the team stood on it and put their paws on each other shoulders to ensure that they wouldn't become separated as they traveled between the worlds. In just a moment, they were sent into the spirit realm, though the trip was hard on the others since they had never been through the experience before.

"My head hurts!" Ayumei whined.

"I certainly didn't expect to feel so ill from the trip." Kheiryn said.

"Are we all here though? That's most important right now." Achamaru asked and everyone glanced around at each other.

"At least no one passed out. I was worried about that." Saraynea said.

"How are we in the forest again if we entered from Earthfur's mountain?" Mynh asked.

"The spirit realm doesn't mirror our world. That's why it's so important that we stick together. One of us may end up in a part of the spirit realm that actually connects to a very dangerous part of our world such as a desert or even the ocean." Saraynea said. Everyone turned when they heard a rustling sound nearing them.

"You made it. Good." Hototo greeted.

"We tried to make it as quickly as possible. Where is the spirit we need to talk to?" Sarayena asked as she climbed onto his back, not wanting to waste time. The walk was much longer than anyone expected. By the time they made it to their destination, most of the team had climbed onto Hototo's back for a ride. He led them to a shallow cave in the forest. In the center, a large figure hung from the ceiling.

"There are more than I expected." A voice echoed in the cave.

"They are friends of my partner so they are all allies to our cause." Hototo explained to the hanging figure. It opened its massive wings to reveal that the spirit was a large bat. His eyes were deep red and some of his large fangs stuck out of his jaw.

"What's your name?" Saraynea asked. The bat's smile revealed the rest of his large sharp fangs.

"Bloodfang." He answered. "So you've all come to help?"

"We will do whatever we can." Saraynea said.

"Good. There is no room for slacking here. Some of my brothers were taken to your realm by a shaman who is now stealing their energy for his plans. I'm not quite sure what his intentions are, but it matters not. I just want to rescue them."

"So you just need us to get your brothers back?" Achamaru asked.

"Yes."

"I knew Darkstorm would go and spend a lot of time in the spirit realm." Kheiryn started. "But, he never said much about why. From what I know, he was trying to master using a new element to control a beast he was creating."

"When we fought him in the caves, he told me that he had big plans for me, but I needed to become stronger. I never understood why he let me go that day." Saraynea said.

"Spirits can only spend so much time in your realm before they begin to weaken. Even if this Darkstorm character is trying to absorb the energy from spirits, the energy will still weaken over time. The only way a spirit can regain energy to remain in your realm for longer is to find a vessel to stay in."

Bloodfang explained.

"Can spirits only partner with shamans?" Kheiryn asked.

"No. It's just a convenience because shamans have a strong connection to the elements and since we spirits are made of elemental energy, it's just easier to use a shaman for a vessel. If the energy of the spirit doesn't merge with the energy of the vessel, the vessel may die from not being able to contain the spirit's energy."

"So Darkstorm doesn't *need* another shaman. He's just targeting Saraynea for some other reason." Kheiryn said.

"But, Darkstorm is a shaman too. If he's trying to keep a spirit in our realm, why doesn't he just be the one to hold the spirit?" Saraynea questioned.

"We're missing something." Feleine said. "Can you tell us anything else?"

"I'm afraid not. After seeing my brothers be taken so easily, I knew I wouldn't have stood a chance. If I was captured, I'd be useless to rescue them."

"How many were taken?" Achamaru asked.

"Twilight, a dark dragon, was the first to be attacked. When Shadowtalon the dark raven tried to help, he was also subdued. Armorscale is only made of guardian energy, so I do not know why he was also taken, but I assume just for interfering with the fight as well. I fear I may be next, but I have to help them."

"It won't be easy to sneak three spirits from the clan's base." Kheiryn said in a serious tone.

"There must be a way." Bloodfang said. "We cannot let the shaman continue his experiments. Darkness is a very difficult element for shamans to learn to control. If he succeeds, he could be a danger to both our realms."

"Even if we make it into the camp, what do we do then? We'll be surrounded by the enemy with no idea where to find these spirits." Feleine said.

"I should be able to sense them, though it'll be hard if they're weak." Saraynea replied.

"I know for sure that even if you release them, they'll likely be too weak to return to the spirit realm on their own. They'll need vessels to help them recover." Bloodfang glanced at Saraynea's friends. "Unfortunately, this shaman won't be able to carry Shadowtalon or Twilight. Armorscale, being a guardian,

can be carried by anyone else."

"Why can't Sara help them?" Achamaru asked.

"Hototo is made of a combination of holy and guardian energy. While being a guardian wouldn't be an issue, it's the holy part that would prevent her from being able to carry either of the others. Certain combinations mix just fine, but opposites can have trouble sharing a vessel." Bloodfang explained before he stared at Ayumei for a moment. "You can carry Twilight."

"Me? I mean, it's not that I don't want to, but I only know how to work with fire, water, and arcane."

"Twilight's dark and your arcane energy should merge just fine. You there..." he looked to Achamaru. "I'm sensing a noble aura. You can handle Armorscale easily. Now for Shadowtalon. I think you two will get along." He said to Mynh. "He's a rather serious fellow as well.

"Maybe I should take one of the dark spirits? I do have a close connection to the shadows." Kheiryn asked.

"Don't worry, your aura is hard to miss. You're quite interesting since you seem to carry both light and dark energy, yet they seem perfectly balanced within you. Perhaps you could be my vessel for this mission? If we share a connection, I could provide some assistance especially since I'd have an instant doorway between realms."

"All right then. I'd like to do whatever I can to help." Kheiryn agreed and Bloodfang approached her and pressed a long claw against her chest. Kheiryn felt a burst of energy course through her body.

"So that's half of the plan organized then. "Korramaru said. "Now we just have to get to the camp and plan an escape."

"Have you forgotten, dear? You have two traitors to that clan on your side." Kheiryn smiled as she stood next to Mynh.

"We can guide you all there." Mynh said.

"We should be able to finalize our plan from your realm." Hototo said as he merged with Saraynea in a bright flash of light. Saraynea used her claw to carve a rune into the ground, exactly matching the one they used to enter the spirit realm.

"Everyone ready to go back?" Saraynea held out her paw which Feleine grabbed. Once everyone's paw was being held, Saraynea stepped onto the rune to return to their own realm.

Saraynea tossed and turned, but could not find sleep. She did not even feel tired as she dealt with a thought on her mind. Knowing that she would not be able to ignore it, she got up and made her way to where the trees parted and she could see the sky. Feleine quietly leaned up and looked over her shoulder to see where her friend was going. Knowing that something was wrong, she followed her.

"Something bothering you?" she asked as she sat next to Saraynea who stared up at the night sky.

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it." she said and paused to give Saraynea the option to talk about what was bothering her or not. After a few silent moments, Saraynea finally spoke.

"What do we do when we're done?" she asked without moving her gaze from the sky.

"Done? You mean when we rescue the spirits?"

"I mean when we're done with everything, after we defeat Darkstorm. What will everyone do from there?"

"I guess we'll all just go home. We've all been away from our homes for a while." Feleine said. Saraynea looked down and sniffled.

"Will we all still be friends? Everyone lives so far from each other. Mynh lives somewhere in a forest, Ayumei and Achamaru have their town to return to, Korramaru will probably go on her own adventures again, and even Kheiryn and Huo have been so helpful to us even though we haven't known them for as long. I'd like to find a home in the town were you're from, but I'll still miss the others. This is my family. The only family I've ever had. As much as I want to be done with Darkstorm and his clan, I don't want everyone to separate and forget each other." Saraynea said as tears began to fall from her eyes.

"*That*'s what you're worried about?" Mynh asked causing Feleine and Saraynea to turn and see the others standing behind them.

"You are right about one thing though: we are a family." Achamaru said.

"And family always sticks together!" Ayumei added.

"Stormfang and I always traveled alone, but we've gotten pretty used to being in a group." Korramaru said.

"I can cook anywhere, so wherever you go, I'll be right there with you." Huo said.

"You're getting all worked up over something that should be the least of your concerns." Kheiryn said as she knelt down and wiped the tears from Saraynea's face with her paws.

"No one will forget anyone." Feleine said. "We've been through so much together. We're all connected so no matter what, we're always a family." Saraynea turned to her as tears flooded her eyes and wrapped her arms around her.

"Group hug!" Ayumei cheered as she ran up to Saraynea. Huo, Achamaru and Mynh quickly joined. Kheiryn even spread her wings to try to make her hug even larger.

"Get over here Korramaru. Don't act like you don't want to be a part of this." Kheiryn teased and used one of her wings to pull Korramaru close. Even Stormfang pressed his body against the group.

"Thank you." Saraynea whispered to Feleine.

"Let's go over this one last time." Earthfur said in a serious voice as he and all the others sat in a circle. "Our only goal for this is to find the spirits and return them here. Strongfeather was able to create a teleportation rune to take you all there since Mynh and Kheiryn were able to point out the location on a map. Be sure that you all have each other's paws so that you all arrive together."

"I will stay hidden at the location where we end up in the camp and prepare a rune that will take us back here." The hippogryph explained. "When you have the spirits, you must all return to my rune and only step on it when you are all connected again. The teleportation is instant, so as soon as it is activated, it will destroy itself so none of the clan members take the trip as well."

"Be sure to not touch the rune unless you are all connected! If anyone is not

being touched, they will be left behind which is not a scenario that can be easily fixed. Everyone understands?" Earthfur glanced around to make sure everyone looked confident and prepared. "Let's get started then." Strongfeather stood before the rune that had been dug into the dirt and turned his head to the others behind him. When everyone grabbed a paw, Mynh then grabbed one of Strongfeather's antlers.

"Be careful." Huo said. Saraynea smiled at him to try to comfort him, but she was also consumed with fear. She knew everyone was.

"Only when everyone is ready." Strongfeather said and everyone nodded to each other. "All right then. Be on your guard as soon as we arrive. There are no second chances here." He finished and stepped onto the pattern, causing the entire group to disappear in an instant. Earthfur and Huo sat in front of the rune to wait for them to return.

Saraynea and her friends arrived at the border of the clan's base, hidden by stacks of supply crates. Kheiryn and Mynh peeked over the boxes, trying to realize their exact location.

"I think there's one nearby." Saraynea whispered.

"I'm getting a feeling too. I assume it's Bloodfang sensing their locations." Kheiryn said and she found herself staring at another high stack of crates. "I think it's coming from behind there. Luckily this area doesn't usually have high traffic." They quickly checked to make sure that no one was nearby before making their way to the other crates. Tied to the ground in chains was a blue dragon. He was badly beaten even though he wore some pieces of armor.

"Who are you?" he weakly asked. "I can tell that you are not like the others."

"We're here to help. What's your name?" Saraynea asked.

"I am Armorscale. I was taken along with two others. They're also somewhere in this camp"

"Don't worry. We'll find them too." Saraynea turned to Achamaru. "Press your paw to him and he'll be able to merge with you."

"Interesting plan. Let us find the others quickly and get out of this place." Armorscale said before turning into a blue aura as Achamaru allowed him to merge with her.

"He's so weak." Achamaru said as she was able to sense his energy within her.

"The others can't be in any better condition." Mynh turned to Saraynea. "Can you tell where the others are from here?" Saraynea knelt on her knee and pressed her paw to the ground.

"One of them is trapped in some sort of energy prison and the other is in a cave." She said.

"I know where the one in the energy prison is. It's the one in the cave that we're going to have a lot of trouble with." Kheiryn said.

"That cave is where Darkstorm stays." Mynh added.

"Oh great. How do we sneak into his main lair?" Korramaru asked.

"We can't" Kheiryn replied. "Our only chance at getting that one out of here is to run in, grab it, and escape. If Darkstorm happens to be in there when we arrive, this mission will instantly fail."

"If something happens, we stick together and fight." Korramaru said.

"Hm...perhaps we won't have to fight as much. Kheiryn said as she lifted the cover to one of the crates. "This crate contains some potions that I made. They constantly ask me to make more when there's plenty right here." she grabbed several and placed them in her robe.

"Are those fire breath potions? Those sound like they'd be useful." Korramaru asked. Kheiryn giggled in response.

"I'm afraid not dear, but they will prove to be helpful. They're sleep potions. Luckily for us, Saraynea will be able to work with it since its base is water. If we time it right, we could sneak some of this to the guards. We just have to be careful to not fall asleep ourselves. These potions work in two ways: one way is to slip it into a drink or food, but it also works by inhaling the vapor. Just to be safe, we should all hold out breath when opening one up."

"That's a strong potion." Achamaru said in awe.

"Oh thank you. I worked very hard on it." Kheiryn smiled.

The team managed to sneak to where Shadowtalon was being held in a magic orb that was being powered by two totems. Guarding him were three guards trying to play a card game at a table. Shadowtalon glanced at the large rocks behind them and began to screech. The guards tried to ignore him, but they soon stood up and walked in front of him.

"It's not time for your food yet! Just keep you beak shut! You're not getting out of there no matter how irritating you are!"

"I don't understand how we got stuck watching the annoying one."

"Now Sara. Quickly." Kheiryn said as the team hid behind the rocks. She opened a bottle and Saraynea began to move her paws to control the potion and split it into three globs before sending them in the cups on the table. Shadowtalon became quiet and the guards returned to their table. After a short moment they began to drink from their cups and they soon passed out, allowing the team to approach the captured raven.

"Ah I knew I sensed something different." Shadowtalon greeted. "I can tell that you have two of my brothers with you. We must escape from this place!"

"We're getting all three of you out of here. But first, we have to deal with these totems." Saraynea formed lightning in her paws and struck at the totem, destroying it and weakening the magic cage. Ayumei also used her more quiet magic to break the other, freeing Shadowtalon and causing him to fall on his stomach.

"I hoped that I'd have more energy than this." Shadowtalon sighed. Mynh approached him and placed her paw on his beak, allowing them to merge.

"Now for the hardest part." Kheiryn said.

"What do we do from here?" Feleine asked.

"Well, the only idea I have is to throw around these potions while we rush to Darkstorm's cave. Even if any of the clan members try to chase us, they'll eventually tire and fall asleep." Kheiryn replied.

"Better than nothing I guess." Feleine said. "We'd better move. I'd like to get out of here as soon as possible."

"Once we have Twilight, we'll be able to run back to Strongfeather, and we'll be safe." Ayumei said.

"Uh guys, there's trouble!" Achamaru warned. The others turned and saw the guards that she had noticed.

"I knew they'd find us, but I hoped that it wouldn't be this fast." Mynh said

as she readied her bow.

"We don't have time to fight them!" Kheiryn said. "Just run and stay together no matter what!" she ordered and the group followed her. As they ran, Kheiryn threw her flasks behind them, infecting the clan with her sleep potion. While some of them tired as planned, the camp was quickly notified of the intrusion and more warriors joined the chase.

"The good news is that the cave's entrance is open, so we know Darkstorm isn't in there." Mynh said as she led the group toward the opening.

"What's bad about that?" Feleine asked.

"Since he's not in there, then we have no idea where he is."

"We just have to hope at this point that we'll escape before he finds us." Kheiryn said. In the center of the cave was a dark blue and purple dragon, tied by several chains that hung him from the ground. Ayumei quickly ran up to him and pressed her paw on his snout.

"We have to merge so we can get you out of here!" she said.

"Move." Twilight said.

"We have the others already! We have to hurry!"

"Move!" Twilight nudged Ayumei to the side with his snout and took a deep breath, causing the others to run from being directly in front of him. Twilight breathed a powerful shadow-fire breath at the clan members, causing them to have trouble entering the cave. At the end of his breath, he coughed violently and hung limp in the chains. "Now." he said and Ayumei pressed her paw into his side, allowing his aura form to free himself from the chains and merge with her. Saraynea quickly stood in front of the entrance and lifted a thick rock wall to block it off.

"At least they can't get in, but how do we get out now?" Kheiryn questioned.

"Follow me!" Saraynea ran to the side wall and with a pushing motion, she began to form a tunnel in the wall. The tunnel finally ended and the team was able to step outside again, though there were more clan members that quickly readied for a fight.

"How many more potions do we have?" Feleine asked to Kheiryn.

"I threw them all."

"I guess we get ready to fight as well then." Achamaru said.

"Did I ever tell you guys how I was named The Bladed Dragon?"

"Stories are nice, but I don't think now is a good time, Korramaru!" Ayumei said.

"It's not as much a story as it is a demonstration." Korramaru stood in front of the group and took a deep breath. As the clan members rushed toward them, she let out a loud and forceful roar, strong enough to push them back and to the ground in a daze. "Stay behind me!" she ordered as they ran back toward the supply area. Whenever clan members became too close, Korramaru would quickly turn and let out a fierce roar to send them back. After performing several roars in succession, she suddenly stopped and coughed a few times.

"Maybe you shouldn't do that so much." Kheiryn said as she placed a paw on Korramaru's shoulder, but she shook her head and continued to lead the group.

"There's Strongfeather!" Feleine said and they pushed for a final sprint to their escape, but the clan members were not far behind. Korramaru turned and let the others pass her before letting a final roar before she fell to her knees.

"Korramaru!" Kheiryn rushed to help lift her to her feet. "We're almost there! Just hurry and grab Achamaru's paw!" she said and Korramaru did her best to make her way to Feleine, Achamaru, and Ayumei who were already holding each other's paws as they stood in front of Strongfeather, who was already standing on the rune. Saraynea stood next to Kheiryn and sent a strong wind blast to push the clan members away to give them more time. "Come on! We have to go!" Kheiryn grabbed Saraynea's wrist and ran to Korramaru. "Go!" she yelled as she grabbed Korramaru's paw.

Huo and Earthfur stood up as the rune glowed with energy, and the team suddenly appeared. They all collapsed, exhausted. "You have them? The spirits are safe?" Earthfur asked.

"Where is Saraynea?" Huo asked.

"What?" Feleine and the others began to quickly glance around.

"And Kheiryn." Ayumei said with worry.

"How!? We were all together! Kheiryn said we were ready." Achamaru said.

"I had her." everyone turned to Korramaru. Stormfang nudged his head against her back to comfort her. "I felt Kheiryn's paw before she called out." Korramaru continued in a raspy voice.

"But why aren't they here!?" Feleine cried out.

"Something must have broken the connection before we returned." Strongfeather said.

"This is not good." Earthfur pressed his paw to his forehead.

## Part 10

Kheiryn stood with her paw trapped in a rock pillar, still tightly holding onto Saraynea's wrist. "That was close." Venomclaw stood next to her and plunged one of her daggers into Kheiryn's shoulder. She cried out in agony and her wing unraveled into flailing shadow tendrils before retreating into her body. She let go of Saraynea and held her bleeding shoulder as Venomclaw laughed.

"Kheiryn!" Saraynea prepared to attack when she suddenly became trapped in a mound of earth that had formed around her, preventing her from being able to move.

"You have no idea how badly I've wanted to do that!" Venomclaw laughed and stabbed Kheiryn's other shoulder, causing her second wing to also retreat into her body. Saraynea winced as she heard Kheiryn scream again. She heard another laugh from behind her.

"I knew we would see each other again soon, but I didn't expect you to come to me." Darkstorm walked in front of Saraynea. "You even got rid of those spirits for me too. I didn't need them anymore." He turned to Kheiryn and released her trapped paw, allowing her to drop to her knees. "I recently heard that your loyalties shifted. Now that you've proven that you have, you will now be treated like the traitor you are. You may do whatever you'd like with her." He said to Venomclaw who kicked Kheiryn's shoulder, forcing her closer to the ground before continuing to beat her. Other clan members joined in until she was surrounded and could not be seen but only heard as she cried out from the beating. "While she's getting what she deserves..." Darkstorm turned back to Saraynea. "I will make the preparations. I think you're ready for the ritual now." He smiled.

Saraynea was forced against a wall with her paws and feet being covered by earth. She struggled but could not break free or even try to control the elements with her paws immobilized. Kheiryn was on the ground nearby, her robe becoming stained from her badly bleeding wounds.

"I want to stab her again, but I'm afraid she'll die too quickly." Venomclaw said as she kicked Kheiryn's shoulder, causing her to whimper. She was barely conscious and did not have the strength to try to move. Tears formed in

Saraynea's eyes as she could do nothing to help. Darkstorm approached Saraynea and held her chin to turn her head so she faced him.

"I must admit that you are beautiful." He said and she jerked her head and snarled at him. "You know that I have no intentions of killing you right? In fact, I believe that things can work out between the two of us." he said as he placed his paw on her cheek, even as she struggled to remove his touch. "Relax. Like I said, I have no desire to hurt you. I really do like you and think about it: when two shamans mate, they have a better chance at bringing more shamans into the world." Rage replaced her fear and Saraynea quickly turned her head to spit at him. "I see. I understand though, considering that you've been separated from your friends. I can't expect you to want to be my mate just yet."

"I'd never mate with you! As soon as I get the chance, I'll make you suffer for what you've put me and my friends through!" Saraynea growled.

"You say that now because you're afraid, but your thoughts might change once we start to work together." He said. A massive black dragon floated down in front of her, causing fear to rush through her body.

"What is that!?" she questioned, sensing how evil the creature was.

"This is the spirit that you will provide a vessel for." Darkstorm said as he stood beside it. "I've been working very hard creating this amazing beast. I made it by corrupting the dark essence of those spirits that you worked so hard to free."

"If it's dark, then it can't even merge with me. My spirit companion is made from the light element." Saraynea's voice shook with fear. Her heart began to race when Darkstorm laughed is response.

"You don't think I've thought about that? Don't worry, this spirit will merge with you just fine. Its origins are light."

"What!?"

"I captured a light spirit and corrupted it to what it is now. All it needs now is a vessel."

"Why don't you just merge with it?" Saraynea's curiosity forced her to ask.

"Me? I didn't create it to merge with it! I created it to *control* it! Spirits are simply elemental tools to be used by shamans."

"Spirits aren't tools!" Saraynea snarled. "They're our partners! We help each other!"

"Oh really? Where is yours then?" Darkstorm asked. Saraynea glared at him. She felt Hototo's energy within her and knew that he was glaring at their opponent as well. "Would you kindly ask your spirit to leave? My much stronger creation needs you for a vessel more than your *partner* does."

"I'll never allow it to merge with me!" Saraynea yelled but Darkstorm only snickered in response. The dragon rushed into Saraynea's stomach. She screamed from the agony that rushed through her body. Deep within her, she could feel Hototo's energy fighting against the spirit.

"Now what?" Arcantis asked as he and the rest of the clan watched.

"Of course she's going to fight it, but she will weaken and have to accept it." Darkstorm explained. Some of the others turned or lowered their heads if they could not keep watching Saraynea struggle, though they still could not block out her screams. Kheiryn lie on the ground, her strength drained. Tears formed in her eyes as she knew that Saraynea was suffering much more than she was. A large amount of blood flooded down Saraynea's chin, causing even Venomclaw to flinch from the sight. She started to cough during her cries, causing more blood to escape her jaw. Kheiryn suddenly felt an energy rush from her paws and feet toward her chest and in a burst of dark energy, Bloodfang stood above her. The clan members backed away as he screeched before grabbing Kheiryn in his claws and flying out of the camp.

"Master Darkstorm!" Venomclaw called.

"Yes, I know, I'm right here. We can find her later." He said as his gaze and locked on Saraynea who continued to scream and struggle.

"I can't believe it! I had her paw! I should've held on tighter!" Korramaru weakly said as she cried.

"No one blames you for the separation." Achamaru tried to comfort her. "We'll find them and rescue them. Somehow." she ended with a worried sigh.

"Who will pick fights with me? Who will I argue with?"

"You mean Kheiryn?" I thought you hated her." Ayumei questioned.

"Well, I do. It's just..."

"Oh, so you just *pretend* to hate her!" Ayumei realized.

"N-no! I can't stand her! But it's still bad that we're missing two of our team members." She finished before falling silent. Earthfur and the others looked up as they heard a loud flapping sound approaching them.

"It's Bloodfang!" Achamaru said and they stood up to approach him. Before landing, he placed Kheiryn on the ground. Korramaru rushed over to her and held her in her arms as she knelt on her knees.

"Kheiryn! Are you alright?" she asked with tears in her eyes.

"I've been better."

"Your wings! What happened?"

"Your voice is so weak. I knew all that roaring was hurting you."

"I don't care!" Korramaru said in her badly hoarse voice. "I'm more worried about you right now!" Kheiryn smiled.

"I thought you hated me?" she questioned. Korramaru's worried expression became mixed with embarrassment.

"It's just, we're on the same team, so I have to make sure you're ok like the others."

"Right." Kheiryn gently laughed as she heard right through Korramaru's lie.

"I never really treated you like a team member though." Korramaru admitted.

"Nonsense. I enjoy our friendship. Sure you're usually quite defensive and angry when we talk, but to be fair, I do tease you a lot. I've known for a while that our rivalry is based off of friendship." Korramaru struggled to hold her tears back. "Don't worry my dear, I'm a healer. I'll be up sooner than you think."

"We'll need you to get your strength back." Earthfur said. "Can you tell us what happened? Where is Saraynea?"

"What happened to her? Is she ok?" Feleine asked as tears were already running down her cheeks.

"Feleine, I'm so sorry. I failed to protect her. Darkstorm has her and..."

"And what?" Achamaru asked.

"He performed the ritual with the corrupted spirit."

"That's not good." Earthfur grumbled.

"Is there anything we can do?" Huo asked.

"I've never heard of such a situation before. It's hard to say what we can do or what will happen."

"Earthfur..." Hototo approached, his body covered in scratches and bruises.

"You...you're Saraynea's spirit partner." Earthfur said.

"Yes. I need you to quickly create a spirit trap for me. I tried to push the the corrupted spirit from her, but with so much energy clashing within her already weak body, I knew I was contributing to her pain and internal bleeding. She's still fighting it, but because of our connection, as she becomes corrupted so do I and I know that soon I will not be able to control my actions. I don't want to get in your way."

"Wait, you want the spirit trap so you can be the one trapped inside?" Ayumei asked.

"Spirit traps are very powerful. I know I won't be able to break through. When you save Saraynea, I will return to normal as well."

"I understand. I will prepare the trap." Earthfur said and he stood up. "The rest of you should gather some supplies and set up a new camp right here by my house just to be safe." He finished and walked away with Hototo.

"What exactly are we patrolling for?" Korramaru asked.

"Anything I think." Feleine replied. "Earthfur fears that scouts may try to stay close to this area since we escaped."

"I dare them to fight us again! My voice may be weak, but my arms are just fine! I'll fight them!"

"Take it easy. We're hoping that they aren't near here anyway. As long as we don't have to fight with them, we can take our time coming up with a plan to rescue her." Feleine's voice saddened as she finished her statement.

"We'll find her." Korramaru said to comfort her.

"We have to. I'll never forgive myself if something happens to her." Feleine said before continuing to walk. They braced themselves when a powerful gust of

wind rushed passed them. "Well that was abnormal." Feleine said as she looked up and saw someone standing not too far in front of them. "Sara?" Saraynea is that you!?" Feleine called but Korramaru grabbed her shoulder.

"Something isn't right about this."

"What are you talking about?" Feleine asked as Korramaru drew her blades.

"What's wrong? I thought you'd be happy to see your friend." Arcantis snickered as he appeared through the trees.

"I knew it." Korramaru growled. Earth jutted out from the ground and sent Korramaru on her back.

"Sara! What are you doing?" Feleine asked but Saraynea said nothing as she charged at her. Feleine had to be quick to block Saraynea's strikes.

"She does whatever *we* tell her to now!" Arcantis laughed. Feleine pressed her back against a tree as Saraynea held the sharp tips of her metal claws under her chin.

"Snap out of it!" Feleine begged. "You have to stop this!"

"What are you waiting for? Kill them already." Arcantis ordered, but Saraynea lowered her claw and turned to face him. "Why are you letting them go!? Kill them! They'll get in our way!"

"You don't give me orders." Saraynea replied.

"What? How dare you! We didn't bring you into this world so you could do whatever you want! You're here only to follow our orders!" he roared. Saraynea raised her paw and Arcantis' arms became wrapped with earth that pulled him down to his knees.

"The next time *you* try to give *me* orders, I'll crush your arms." She formed a fist and the earth tightened around his arms. "I'd like to see a mage try to fight without arms..."

"Alright! Just let me go!" he begged and the earth receded, allowing him to stand again. "But what about them? They're still the enemy!"

"I'm not intimidated by them like you are. Just create a portal to take us back."

"Darkstorm won't be pleased with this." Arcantis grumbled as he created a

portal and stepped through. Saraynea turned and stared at Feleine for a moment before stepping through and the portal closed.

"Are you ok?" Korramaru asked as she knelt next to Feleine.

"She almost killed us."

"Yeah, but she didn't, so we should just hurry back to Earthfur and let him know about this!"

"Her eyes..."

"What?" Korramaru questioned as she grabbed Feleine's paw and pulled her to her feet.

"She looked like she was struggling to prevent herself from finishing me off with the claws." Feleine said.

"Oh this is just going from bad to worse." Earthfur sighed as the team sat in a circle.

"What do we do now?" Ayumei asked.

"I don't even know where we would go from here." Achamaru replied.

"Is there anything we can even do for her? We were able to help her before." Kheiryn said.

"Before we were dealing with just a sample of the corruption. Now she has the entire beast within her." Earthfur sighed as he turned to look at Hototo who had begun to emit a dark aura. "He's changing more quickly than I hoped."

"Is it possible to perform a similar procedure as before?" Mynh asked.

"Likely not." Earthfur replied. "The corruption has taken over her entire body as well as her actions. She's not going to volunteer to be held down again. In fact, she'll fight us with all her strength."

"But what if we fight back? She has to tire as well." Korramaru suggested. Earthfur sighed and placed a paw over his face.

"Even if we managed to capture her and hold her down, pulling the spirit out will probably kill her. Kheiryn was strong enough to reverse the damage, but she is suffering from a terrible wound now." "So we do nothing?" Huo asked.

"We have to do something." Ayumei said.

"Would you all really be willing to fight her with all your strength? If you hold back, you'll likely die." Earthfur said.

"I'd do whatever it takes to help her." Mynh said.

"I may be weak, but I want to help the poor girl as well." Kheiryn added.

"We will need everyone's strength to accomplish this mission. I suggest that you come up with a plan together on how you'll capture her during the battle." Earthfur said.

"Aren't you coming with us?" Achamaru asked.

"I'm afraid that I cannot." Earthfur replied. "I have to stay here and watch the spirit trap just in case anything happens. I also have to do some thinking myself on how to remove the spirit from her with the least risk of killing her." Feleine stood up and silently walked toward the forest while the others watched with sadness in their faces.

"This must be so hard for her." Achamaru said.

"We need to come up with a plan that has the smallest risk of hurting Saraynea. If something happens to her..." Mynh looked down and sighed instead of finishing her statement.

"I'll try to work on summoning my healing abilities." Kheiryn said.

"Just don't push yourself. I don't really want anything to happen to you either." Korramaru said quietly.

"Concerned that I'll die?" Kheiryn smiled.

"I don't want anyone from this team to get badly hurt or die." Korramaru replied as she felt her face warm up.

"She needs someone to argue with." Ayumei said.

"I'm just looking out for the whole team! Right now Saraynea and Kheiryn are the most injured so they need to be watched the most." Korramaru said.

"I thought you two had a bonding moment?" Achamaru teased. Korramaru opened her mouth as if to say something, but when nothing came to mind, she

turned her head and crossed her arms, trying to hide her embarrassment while the others chuckled with amusement.

Kheiryn walked through the woods in search of Feleine who had not returned since their first meeting regarding how to rescue Saraynea. She heard a faint sound of gasping and found Feleine who was clearly exhausted as she brought her paws together and began to charge fire energy in the form of a large orb. It swirled with a mix of red and green fire, but suddenly diminished as she dropped to her knees. Kheiryn approached her and held out her paw to help lift her to her feet.

"Huo finished making dinner. You look like you could use a break from whatever it is you've been practicing." Kheiryn said.

"I still can't do it." Feleine replied.

"What's wrong?"

"I was able to summon my energy in the form of a blast when we were attacked in the mountain tunnels, but no matter how hard I try, I just can't do it again."

"You're trying to figure it out before we head into the battle."

"I wanted to see if instead of using offensive energy, I could turn it into a healing blast. With you as injured as you are, I really want to be able to help out as a healer. If I can just get this move right, I could even use it while her back is turned."

"Ah so you plan to hit Sara with a healing blast after we manage to hold her still?"

"When I looked into her eyes when she attacked me and Korramaru, all I saw was pain and suffering. She needs my help now more than ever and I can't even get this right!"

"If only I hadn't let my guard down... I can't help but blame myself for losing her. Feleine, I..."

"I don't blame you. You've proven to me that you're a friend and I know you didn't mean to be separated during our escape from the clan base. Besides you managed to escape because Bloodfang carried you back. It's not your fault that you weren't able to bring her back. You were so badly injured that we're

lucky that you're even here and will be able to help us."

"I guess I just expected you to hate me."

"The only one I hate is Darkstorm. He's the one who hurt her. We already agreed that this is a family, so it would be pointless to point claws at each other. We have to stick together to help her."

"I may be beaten and weak, but I will give all I have to help."

"I know everyone will. I just hope that it'll be enough."

Everyone stood together and prepared to return to Darkstorm's base. Korramaru had removed any unnecessary packs from Stormfang's saddle so he would be able to help fight. Earthfur stayed close to Hototo's spirit trap, inside his colors had darkened and he would try to lunge or swipe at anyone who walked too close, each day growing more aggressive toward the group.

"Where is Feleine? She should be here by now." Achamaru questioned.

"I hope she returns quickly. We need all the strength we can use in this fight." Mynh said.

"We have to be especially careful too. This time I'll open a portal to return back here, but we have to secure Sara first." Ayumei said.

"That's right. And our only goal is to rescue her. We'll think of a plan to finish Darkstorm off later." Achamaru added.

"So you've all come up with a plan?" Earthfur asked as he approached them.

"Sure did. We want to make sure that Sara is ok first, so we're going to try to bring her back as soon as possible." Korramaru explained.

"And instead of using an instant teleport on the way back, I'll create an arcane shield around a portal so everyone can make it through as soon as they can just in case someone needs an extra second or two to reach it." Ayumei continued.

"I see. Everyone is ready then? Where are Kheiryn and Feleine?"

"That's the only problem..." Kheiryn said as she approached them. "I can't find her anywhere."

"What!?" Korramaru yelled. "She knew today was the day!"

"Where would she have gone?" Ayumei asked.

"She's been practicing her special technique too. It would really have helped if she could get it to work right." Kheiryn said.

"I'm getting tired of waiting around. Every day we sit here is another day she spends corrupted." Mynh added.

"Mynh is right. The sooner, the better. I wouldn't be surprised if Feleine started to feel the pressure of having to fight her best friend. If her head isn't in the right place, it would be safer for everyone if she stays behind." Earthfur explained.

"What about you?" Korramaru asked to Kheiryn.

"What about me? I'm coming too of course."

"Are you sure?" Korramaru asked in a low voice.

"Darling, I may not have my wings back yet, but I'm still coming with you. There's no way I'm going to let you have all the fun after what they did to me." She saw concern in the warrior's eyes. "Want me to stay close to you?" she smiled.

"What?" Korramaru blushed.

"That way you can keep an eye on me since you seem so concerned." She giggled as the brown bear was clearly struggling to come up with something to say in response. "Don't worry. I'm going to stay close to you anyway."

"And why's that?"

"So I can keep an eye on you."

"If you all want to go sooner, I can get you there." Strongfeather offered. "I've modified the original rune we used to get you all in the camp so that it will bring you to the edge of the forest before the mountain begins. You'll have more cover from the trees so you can safely hide and prepare yourselves. I'll keep an eye out for Feleine and teleport her to you later."

"Sounds good." Mynh said.

"Don't forget: I also rewrote the rune to be a one-way trip as Ayumei requested, so be careful out there and don't be afraid to retreat sooner if it means

you'll stay alive." He said and the team held paws to make sure everyone was linked. They all nodded to signal that they were prepared and Mynh stepped on the rune.

"I hope they'll be alright." Huo said.

"Just have faith." Earthfur said. "It's the most we can do to help them."

When they arrived at the edge of the forest, the team quickly made sure that everyone had safely arrived, including Stormfang who was joining in on the mission. Through the thinning border of trees, they could see the base of the mountain. They decided to wait a while to make sure everyone was fully prepared for the battle to find and rescue Saraynea. Soon they heard a rustling in the treetops and they each prepared their weapons.

"You haven't fully recovered from the last time we saw each other, yet here you are again." Darkstorm greeted as he, Arcantis, and Venomclaw appeared from behind trees.

"I don't mind. We have unfinished business don't we, Kheiryn?" Venomclaw growled.

"I'm looking forward to finishing our dispute." Kheiryn replied.

"They even brought the cub of the group!" Arcantis laughed at Ayumei who snarled as raging fire enveloped her paws.

"Give us back our friend!" she demanded.

"She's right here. Take her back if you think you can." Darkstorm said and Saraynea jumped down from a tree to stand beside him. "Let's make this fast though. We have plans to get to after we've dealt with you all for good." He said as he stroked Saraynea's cheek.

"Keep you paws away from her!" Korramaru snarled and charged at him, but Saraynea raised her paw, summoning a strong gust to send her flying back.

"Korramaru!" Kheiryn rushed to her side. "Are you alright?"

"That monster! He tries to kidnap her, nearly kills her, forces some beast inside her, and now he's thinking about having her as a mate!?" Seeing that she was attacked, Stormfang quickly began to hiss as lightning began to spark from his jaws

"Did you really come here today believing that you'd be able to stop me and save your friend?" Darkstorm laughed.

"There's one missing." Saraynea suddenly said, catching Darkstorm's attention. "Using her memories, I recognize all of them and their strengths and weaknesses, but I also know that one of them isn't here: the monk."

"Eh? So what? We'll find her and finish her off later." Darkstorm snorted.

"Seems a little peculiar since she seemed to be her best friend." Venomclaw explained. "Looks like the one who should be most concerned has fled and left you all here to fight."

"Feleine wouldn't abandon her or any of us!" Mynh yelled.

"Are we done talking? Can I kill her now?" Venomclaw asked.

"Why ask? Haven't you failed several times?" Saraynea replied and she charged at Mynh. The others tried to stay close to help fight back, but Saraynea ran behind the group and created a powerful gust of wind to force them all into the rocky area outside the forest where the base of the mountain was.

"Hey! Mynh is mine to kill!" Venomclaw roared, her rage building as Darkstorm laughed. Saraynea pressed Mynh against a tree, who tried to free herself from the tight grip on her throat while Saraynea pulled back her other metal claw weapon. Suddenly, sparks of lightning danced all over her body and she froze.

"What is this?" Darkstorm questioned. "What are you waiting for? Get them!" he ordered.

"I...she's fighting my actions!" Saraynea yelled back.

"What!? How!?" he growled. With Saraynea frozen, Achamaru was able to charge at her with her shield to separate her from Mynh.

"What is happening, Master? I thought the corrupted serpent had full control over her body." Arcantis asked.

"I never even considered it to be a serious threat to our plans, but it seems that the shaman is battling with the spirit for control." Darkstorm answered.

"So deep inside she's trying to help protect her friends." Venomclaw sighed. "How sickening..." she snorted.

"It's fixable. Seems like she'll need your help after all." Darkstorm nodded to Venomclaw.

"Perfect. I was hoping to shed a little blood." Venomclaw drew her daggers before rushing toward Mynh who held up her bow for defense. Knowing that without any distance, she would be unable to ready an arrow without being wounded. Achamaru prepared to help, but she was stopped when Arcantis sent a blast of arcane energy toward her, which she barely dodged by jumping back.

"Leave my sister alone!" Ayumei yelled as the fire in her paws grew to surround her arms as she began launching her own attacks to him. He amassed a massive amount of arcane energy in his paws before launching it at her, but Achamaru saw the attack split in half while Ayumei was still charging fire in her own paws. Right after Ayumei cast her attack at Arcantis, Achamaru lunged in front of her, reflecting the arcane energy with her shield and sending it back toward Arcantis while the other half struck her leg, leaving her wincing as she hit the hard ground. The fire and arcane energy merged on its way to Arcantis, who was paralyzed at the sight of the massive cluster of energy which exploded upon impact. "Achamaru! Are you ok? Please say that you're ok!" Ayumei said as she knelt down beside her sister who shrieked with a failed attempt to stand up. "Careful! How bad is your leg?"

"I'm certain that it's broken." Achamaru replied. Not too far away, Venomclaw had seen Achamaru fall and that Ayumei was distracted with her badly injured sister. She struck with her blades again, which pierced through Mynh's bow and became stuck. With a strong twist of her daggers, the bow snapped and broke.

"Now that you're not a threat, I'll just finish off those two since I know that little mage can control magic quite well." Venomclaw said as she rushed behind Mynh to attack Ayumei, but her charge was cut off before she could strike and she was forced to the ground where she and Mynh tussled for a moment. Venomclaw managed to force Mynh against the ground, keeping her still by twisting her arm and pressing down on it with her other paw.

"Just because I don't have a bow doesn't mean I'll sit by and watch you hurt them!" Mynh snarled.

"Looks like you cut your cheek on my blades from that tumble." Venomclaw snickered. "It may not look so bad right now, but soon you'll start to feel the effects of the poison that coats my blades."

"You poisoned me much worse when I resigned as a member of the clan and I survived."

"Yes, well, after seeing you alive after your shaman friend became badly hurt from Arcantis' arcane blast, I modified my poisons a little. But, I still know that you can prove difficult to finish off, so..." Ayumei quickly turned to the sound of a loud crack followed by Mynh's scream.

"Go away!" Ayumei ordered as she formed a dome of arcane energy around her and expanded it so that it rushed over Mynh as well, pushing Venomclaw off her back.

"You brat!" Venomclaw growled as she struck at the arcane energy with her blades, but Ayumei's wall stayed strong.

"I won't let you hurt them anymore!" Ayumei yelled. *I have to concentrate* on this protective dome. *I can't fight or the wall will fail, but I can't leave Achamaru and Mynh exposed with their injuries!* Ayumei focused as she continued to channel arcane energy from her paws to the dome to keep it strong.

"You can't keep that up forever!" Venomclaw said as she began to strike at it with her blades again. "You'll get tired and when your energy is low enough, your little barrier will fall."

"This is bad." Kheiryn whispered to Korramaru as they dodged another electrical attack from Darkstorm, who was able to keep his safe distance from any of them. "Ayumei needs help."

"We can take Venomclaw out!" Korramaru said.

"Listen to me! Even if we defeat her, we'll never be able to bring Darkstorm down ourselves! We have to act quickly before any of the others are further injured."

"What do you plan to do then?"

"Climb onto Stormfang, snatch Saraynea, and bring her back to Earthfur."

"What about you?"

"I'll distract Venomclaw, and then I'll try to keep Darkstorm's attention."

"What!? No way!"

"For once I'm not trying to start an argument with you!" Kheiryn said, but

instead of fighting back, Korramaru tightly wrapped her arms around her.

"I can't let you do this by yourself." Korramaru said in a low voice. Kheiryn was surprised not only from her action, but that Korramaru was crying. "We almost lost you once already!"

"Do you think I'll go down so easily? I still have some revenge to give out to these members of the clan."

"We can distract them together until Feleine gets here. She won't stand a chance if she arrives and we're all defeated." Korramaru suggested as she pulled back, but kept her paws on Kheiryn's shoulders whose expression softened to her usual calm smile.

"We'd better not end up defeated then." Kheiryn said and quickly leaned into her to give a quick affectionate lick to her ear to calm her anxiety before turning and running toward Venomclaw.

"Let's go Stormfang!" Korramaru said as she climbed onto his back. Darkstorm launched another lightning attack at them when they were in the air, but Stormfang quickly countered it with his own lightning breath as they tried to make their way toward Saraynea who was still recovering from her paralysis.

"Venomclaw!" Kheiryn yelled as she grabbed a flask from the back of her belt.

"Ah, yes I almost forgot that I have to finish you off as well. If you're going to run at me like that, I won't say no to your death wish!" Venomclaw prepared to charge when Kheiryn threw down the potion on the ground. "You missed you fool!" Venomclaw laughed.

"I wasn't aiming directly for you." She replied with a smile on her face. Venomclaw realized the consequence of running through the liquid on the ground as it caused her feet to become stuck to the ground. "Now who's the fool?"

"Let's help her out! Make sure she suffers for what she did to Kheiryn!" Korramaru said as she turned Stormfang to face them so he could send a ball of electricity toward Venomclaw. The ball caused the impact area to spark with electricity, while Venomclaw yelled out before she fell to the ground. As they neared Saraynea again, she raised her paws, summoning a strong wind which prevented Stormfang from being able to fly any closer. Korramaru turned her

head to avoid the strong gusts, allowing her to see Kheiryn run up to Darkstorm.

"Seeing as your new allies are all failing in this battle, it seems like you made a bad choice to betray the clan." He said as Kheiryn stood before him.

"I'd rather fall protecting my new allies than continue to live as a part of your group. Besides, two of my friends can be healed for sure while your captains don't seem recoverable."

"It took all of you to bring down my two captains, but you're all terribly weak and injured while I have the rest of the clan back at the base."

"Eventually they'll realize how twisted your intentions are, just as I did and they will turn on you." After a short pause, a root emerged from the ground and tightly coiled around her throat as it lifted her feet from the ground. She clawed at the root, struggling to breathe as Darkstorm motioned with his paws, creating wind blades that tore her robe and cut her body.

"As a traitor to the clan, you deserve a slow painful death." Darkstorm said as he continued to send wind blades at her.

"Stormfang! She needs our help!" Korramaru flew him toward Darkstorm before jumping from his back as he continued to stay high in the air. Darkstorm paused his wind blade attack as he charged electricity in his paws while he glared at Korramaru. She took a deep breath and performed her dragon roar at him, breaking his concentration on his attack as she readied her blades which loudly clanged against his metal claws before she landed. Darkstorm was forced to leap back when Stormfang spat out a lighting ball toward him. With him distracted, Korramaru used her blades to cut the root that held Kheiryn, allowing her to rest on her knees as she tried to catch her breath. Before she had a chance to turn around, Korramaru became trapped in a sphere of wind that Darkstorm controlled with one paw while concentrating lighting in the other. After raising her in the sphere, he channeled the lightning at her, forcing her to take the attack with no way to defend herself or run. Darkstorm then pushed the lightingcharged wind sphere into Stormfang, who was unable to handle such a massive amount of energy and tried to grip the air several times, attempting to stay up, before landing on the ground. Seeing Korramaru plummeting toward the ground, Kheiryn felt a surge of energy rush to her back and with a powerful flap of her wings, she was able to quickly lunge toward Korramaru before her fall ended. Just as suddenly as her wings formed, she felt a jolt of agony and her wings unraveled and the tendrils retreated to her back again as she slid against the hard

ground with Korramaru in her arms, both of them barely conscious.

"Saraynea!" Feleine yelled as she ran through the trees toward her.

"Ah there's the last one. Now, will you finally prove your usefulness and kill one of them!" Darkstorm ordered and Saraynea managed to stand and rush toward Feleine. As they grew close, Feleine's paw became engulfed in a sphere of red and green fire, wildly swirling together. As Saraynea lunged to attack with her metal claws, Feleine stopped running, pulled the fire orb back, and thrust it into Saraynea's stomach before she could attack.

"Let her go!!" Feleine demanded as her attack left Saraynea paralyzed as it slowly pushed into her body. She felt a force pushing against her orb, but she stayed strong and focused as the orb pushed into Saraynea's body, forcing the black dragon within her to fly out of her back and crash into Darkstorm. Saraynea collapsed against Feleine as the black dragon tried to stand.

"Get off me! What happened!?" Darkstorm questioned.

"She forced me out with that attack." The dragon hissed.

"Well, get back to her!"

"Don't you think I know to do that already!" she hissed as she glared at him with her deep red eyes. Fear rushed through Feleine as the dragon lifted into the air and flew toward her as she tightly clung to Saraynea who still was still unconscious. She closed her eyes and pressed her muzzle into Saraynea's shoulder as the dragon roared and closed in on them.

"Did you get them?" Darkstorm asked as the dragon stood from her crash and shook the dirt from her head.

"Does it look like I'm back inside my vessel?" she snapped at him.

"Where did they go?" he growled as he glanced around. He stopped and stared at the dragon whose gaze was locked on a rock that jutted out from the mountain.

"Sara?" Feleine questioned in a low voice, amazed that she managed to avoid the dragon and was still standing.

"You need to get Kheiryn and Korramaru under Ayumei's arcane shield." Saraynea said.

"What? You need to come with us! We need to get out of here!"

"This fight isn't over yet." Saraynea glared down at the dragon.

"To be honest, I wasn't too sure if I'd be able to get that thing out of your body, but I know for sure that you shouldn't fight just yet." Feleine stared at Saraynea for a moment and was surprised at how much energy her eyes expressed. "I'll fight with you." She said, but Saraynea turned and smiled at her.

"They need your healing abilities very badly right now. You have to help them now. Just leave Darkstorm and the dragon to me."

## Part 11

"I'm so sorry. If I knew this would happen, I would have come much sooner." Feleine said as she focused her healing flames into Kheiryn to quickly heal her minor scratches and wounds.

"I'm just glad you showed up at all." Kheiryn replied.

"Feleine, Mynh isn't looking too good." Ayumei said weakly as she turned her head to look at Mynh who was sitting against a tree and holding the shoulder of her broken arm. Sweat dripped from her fur as she struggled against the poison that was coursing through her body.

"I was there when Venomclaw changed her poison. I can make an antidote for her if I had the right herbs." Kheiryn said.

"In one of the bags on Stormfang's saddle..." Korramaru started. "There should be a bag of herbs. Maybe some of them will be able to help."

"Take care of someone else in the meantime." Kheiryn said as she slowly stood up and approached Stormfang. "Seems like he could use some of your healing as well. He is a member of the team after all." She said as she rummaged through the bags for the herbs she needed.

"Ayumei, are you alright?" Achamaru asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." She replied but it was clear that her energy was running low.

"I can't stand sitting here while Sara is fighting that thing!" Korramaru said as she sat up and used one of her blades as a support as she tried to stand.

"You shouldn't move too much. You might pass out." Kheiryn warned, but Korramaru ignored the warning. As soon as she stood up, her knees weakened and she collapsed on the ground. "At least we don't have to worry about her running out there and getting herself killed." Kheiryn sighed.

"I don't know how she's doing it either." Feleine said as she saw the raging battle between Saraynea and the black dragon. "After all she's been through, I was amazed that she could even stand, and now she's able to fight against the corrupted spirit itself."

"Her own spirit must be very strong. I just hope she can keep up that fighting." Kheiryn said.

Saraynea constantly switched between elements to adjust to how the dragon attacked her. When the beast rose in the air and took a deep breath, Saraynea formed an earth dome to protect herself as the dragon breathed a dark energy toward her.

"You can't hide down there forever!" the dragon roared as she landed and began to viciously dig up the dome.

"Behind you!" Darkstorm yelled and the dragon quickly turned her head to see Saraynea above her with her paws coated in flames. Before she could avoid the attack, Saraynea had slammed down on her head with her flaming paws, forcing her jaw to make a hard impact against the ground. "Enough!" Darkstorm roared as he leaped toward Saraynea who used the wind to jump back and gain distance. When he landed, Darkstorm slammed his paws into the ground, causing pillars to emerge and send the limp body of the dragon toward the others.

"This is bad." Ayumei muttered as the massive dragon slammed against the arcane shield, shattering it and causing her to fall to her knees as the dragon lay before them.

"Drink this Mynh. I'll make something much stronger for you as soon as I can, but this will at least slow the poison." Kheiryn said as she helped Mynh to drink from the bowl.

"Help." a voice whispered and everyone turned to the dragon. The black color of her body had begun to melt away, revealing yellow scales. "My name is Brightscale. Your friend has been able to put up a good fight, but when I was inside her body, I could sense how weak she was becoming. Her spirit is strong, but this rush of energy won't last for much longer. Darkstorm will be able to defeat her if we don't do something."

"We already know that." Feleine said. "But we're in no condition to fight. We have to get Sara out of there and escape!"

"It will take weeks, likely months, for you all to recover and by then he will already have found you and finish you for good." Brightscale explained.

"Then what can we do?" Feleine asked.

"I just need enough energy to merge with Saraynea again. I will lend her my strength which should be enough to end Darkstorm. Please, if any of you are healers, I need your help." She asked. Feleine quickly focused her energy to healing Brightscale.

Saraynea glared at Darkstorm, breathing heavily from her fight with Brightscale. She knew she had spent a lot of energy, but after a quick glance at her friends, she refused to give up. Her paws had been burning when she summoned her elemental powers. She tried to move her fingers, but her paws hurt, forcing her to look at them to see that they had become badly scratched and bleeding from constantly charging and switching elemental energies. Darkstorm laughed as he approached her. "You're exhausted. What do you think you'll accomplish by fighting me? Once you have no energy left to stand, I will finish off your friends before ending you as well. With my spirit now ruined, I've no use for you anymore."

"Hurry, little one." Brightscale said. "We don't have much time."

"I'm sorry. I'm trying." Feleine answered, trying to put as much power into her healing as she could, but she could not help that she was still new to being a healer. Kheiryn stood next to her and pressed her paws to the Brightscale's body. Her paws began to glow with her golden healing energy. They were able to hear the clash of the metal claw weapons as Darkstorm and Saraynea began to fight. While she was able to defend herself and avoid his attacks, she was not able to strike as quickly due to her exhaustion, allowing Darkstorm to easily dodge or block her attacks. She began to try to keep her distance, and started to use her elemental abilities, doing her best to ignore the pain that consumed her paws. As their battle continued, Saraynea began to have a hard time keeping up with him and started to take more hits from his attacks, weakening her even faster.

"How much longer?" Ayumei asked.

"It's not enough. You'd be better off fleeing while you can." Brightscale said in a solemn tone.

"I can't leave Saraynea behind! If she falls here today, I'd rather go down with her than live with knowing I failed her!" Feleine replied.

"We can't give up!" Kheiryn said as she looked over her shoulder back at Korramaru, who was regaining consciousness as Stormfang nudged his snout into her. She thought about how Korramaru had rushed in to help her even when the odds were obviously against them. "I refuse to give up!" she said as the glow around her paws brightened as her abilities grew stronger. The others watched in awe as the same bright light began to emit from where her wings would normally be. Consumed in her concentration, Kheiryn did not even seem to notice that a faint golden glow began to emit from her body. When it seemed like the golden energy from her back could glow no brighter, a pair of wings, appearing to be engulfed in golden flames, had formed. Brightscale began to try to stand on her claws as her mane and horns began to glow with the return of her own energy.

Saraynea's metal claws clashed with Darkstorm's as they began to push against each other. She tried to hold her ground, but her claws began to slide through the dirt as he pushed against her. He suddenly pulled back one of his claws, summoning a small pillar to trap her paw. She barely managed to dodge the claws as three deep scratches cut her cheek, though she was still unable to efficiently move with her paw trapped in the rock. He snickered at her struggle and she knew she needed to find a way to free her other paw which continued to push against his. Instead of focusing on the trapped paw, she began to build up fire energy and concentrated it into the metal claw. Her paw began to burn, but after a quick push to send the heat into Darkstorm's metal claw, he backed away to remove it while Saraynea gnawed at the strap under her own to make it fall to the ground. With Darkstorm distracted, the earth pillar crumbled back to soft dirt, however she did not have a chance to act as he landed a powerful blow to her stomach that forced her to her paws and knees.

"Time to finish you off." He said as he raised the metal claw that remained. Brightscale lunged toward Saraynea and a bright flash forced Darkstorm to back away, shielding his eyes as the dragon merged with her. With a burst of energy, Saraynea was able to quickly form a large golden blaze in her paws and with a thrust of her paws, a massive golden flamethrower consumed Darkstorm, ending his threat. She grew dizzy and Brightscale left her body to return to the spirit realm. Feleine rushed toward her after seeing her collapse to the ground.

"Sara! You'll be ok! Just stay with me!" Feleine begged as she knelt on the ground to hold her in her arms. Her heart sank and tears flooded her eyes as she was able to see how badly injured Saraynea was. She continued to try to call to her as the others watched with their own teary eyes, unsure of Saraynea's condition and if she would be able to recover.

"Where is she?" Earthfur said as he and Strongfeather ran through the trees to the open rocky area.

"Earthfur? What about Hototo and Huo?" Korramaru asked.

"Hototo suddenly returned to normal before collapsing. We used the same rune you did to get here." Earthfur replied as he noticed Feleine and Saraynea and rushed toward them. "Oh this looks bad." he said as he appeared and glanced around at everyone. When he saw Feleine and Saraynea, he rushed over to them.

"She defeated him?" Earthfur asked to Feleine who was only able to nod in response as her crying worsened. "She doesn't look good. I still want to bring her to a healer, but how do we get everyone else safely to a town as well?" he wondered as he looked back at the others who were clearly weak and injured.

"We need to get out of here." Kheiryn said.

"But how?" Korramaru asked. "Ayumei is too weak to create a portal and even if we return to Earthfur's place, there just isn't enough room for all of us to rest there.

"We can help." Shadowtalon said as he and the other dark spirits that were rescued appeared in translucent images that darkened into tangible forms as they traveled from the spirit realm.

"We're still weak, but we can at least get you somewhere safe." Armorscale added.

"We do owe you for all that you've done to help us." Bloodfang said.

"Please take us to The Blossoming Hillside!" Feleine requested as she held Saraynea in her arms with Earthfur at her side.

"Is there somewhere any closer than that?" Earthfur asked.

"Sara struggled to get me back home! I want her to know that I made it back there in case she..." Feleine could not even finish her statement.

"We can get you there." Twilight said.

"We'd better hurry now. They were swift with our rescue." Armorscale said as they prepared to bring them to their destination.

Huo was busy in the kitchen of Feleine's home in the training academy of

her hometown while the others sat in the living room watching Ayumei tickle Achamaru by sticking chopsticks in the space between the bottom of her foot and the cast that prevented her from bending her knee. "Ayumei! Stop it!" her sister cried out through her laughs. "This is seriously unfair!" she said as she grabbed the pillow from under her head to throw it at Ayumei who giggled in response.

"Well that didn't really convince me to stop any time soon." She teased as the others laughed from the other three small sofas in the room.

"Just remember to not use those to eat with." Feleine laughed as she placed down a tray of food on the low table in front of the sisters. Huo also placed a tray on the other side where Mynh was using a whole sofa to herself to rest as she continued to recover from the poison. Kheiryn brought a tray in for herself and one for Korramaru using her shadow tendrils which had returned to her body when her wings reappeared while healing Brightscale. Feleine glanced around for a moment to make sure they all had enough to eat.

"You do need to eat too, you know." Huo said as he handed a tray to Feleine.

"Yeah, I guess I've been so distracted with making sure everyone is recovering." She said.

"Just because you're a healer doesn't mean you should ignore your own needs."

"Right." She said quietly and took the tray from him before carefully making her way toward the door to her bedroom. She slowly slid the door open using the claws on her feet and gently closed it before walking toward the bed that was closest to the door and placed the tray on a crate. She quietly sat on the edge of the bed for a moment before a smile formed on her face as the only thing she could see appearing from under the sheets was a red ear. She gently ran her claw along the ear, causing it to flick as the sheets moved before becoming still again.

"Come on now. I know you're tired, but you need to eat." She said as she continued to tickle the ear, causing gentle laughing to be heard from under the blankets as it continued to flick around to try to avoid the single claw that caused its torment.

"I'm up, I'm up." Saraynea said weakly as she rolled on her back and pulled

her bandaged paws out from under the blanket. Feleine gathered some slices of meat in the chopsticks and fed them to Saraynea. Nearing the end of her meal, she yawned and closed her eyes. "I don't think I can eat another bite."

"Well, you have one left, and you need energy to recover so open up." Feleine said and she managed to quickly sneak the last bite of food into Saraynea's mouth at the end of another yawn. "There." She said and she watched her friend roll on her side again and pull the blanket over her face with her ear still sticking out. Feleine giggled as she picked up the tray and left the room.

Huo walked along the stone path through town with his satchel of fresh vegetables. The weather had turned warm and the trees had been shedding their petals. While the sight of the petals decorating the town was beautiful, the sight of females had become one to fear for Huo.

"Hey there!" a female greeted as she ran up to him from behind.

"Oh, uh, hello." He tried to sound polite.

"I've seen you around here a lot lately. You're new right?"

"Yes I recently moved here, but-"

"Well, you arrived just in time! You may have been here only recently, but I'm sure you know what time of year it is?"

"Yes, it's pairing season."

"Pairing season! Right! And you usually walk all by yourself." she quickly stepped in front of him to prevent him from walking. "It looks like you could use a mate."

"I already have a mate." Huo quickly answered. The female's expression changed from flirty to angry. "Look, I'm sorry, but..."

"Already have a mate, do you? Well where is she? I never see you walking with anyone."

"She's right behind you actually." Huo motioned with his snout and the female turned to see Saraynea. While her stance was weak from her recovering injuries, her eyes were still energetic and serious.

"Oh, your mate is the really strong shaman. The one from all the stories?"

"Yeah, that's me. So, you don't think I'm good enough for my mate?"

"No, no! I just didn't know! It was nice to see you up and around, but I should really get going. I have plans." the female said before quickly walking away. Saraynea snorted, but a kiss to her forehead was enough to change her focus to Huo.

"You should be resting." He said.

"I'm always in bed! It's nice to get up and move around when I can." She said.

"I'm glad that you're getting better, but if you move around too much you might get hurt."

"Well someone has to protect you from all these females." She said, earning her another kiss.

"Can you at least try to be more careful? Next time one of us can go with you." Feleine said as she sat next to Saraynea.

"I think it's so cute how she ignores her own injuries to stay near her mate!" Ayumei said causing Saraynea to blush as the others chuckled.

"Ignoring her injuries is exactly how she'll end up hurting herself!" Feleine was the only one who was not amused. "It takes a lot of energy to heal those wounds. You already have Huo, so you don't even need to be out there with those frisky females. They'll treat you like you're not even there to try to get to a male."

"You don't *have* to be outside to feel the love in the air." Kheiryn said.

"Ok, but why is everyone staring at me?" Feleine asked.

"You've been a little moody lately." Achamaru said.

"Achamaru used to tell me that when a girl likes someone, she gets moody around pairing season because of the competition. You like someone don't you?" Ayumei teased. Feleine's face turned red as she looked down at her paws.

"Oh, a delay? There is someone isn't there?" Korramaru joined.

"Well, no, not really."

"Might as well just admit it at this point." Achamaru laughed.

"It doesn't matter." Feleine sighed.

"Don't say that, darling. Of course it matters." Kheiryn said.

"No, it doesn't. He's popular, so there are a ton of females who go after him." Feleine answered.

"Don't worry!" Saraynea put her arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "We'll get him to notice you!"

"What? No!"

"After what you put me through, you think I'm not going to help you get your crush?"

"Yeah look at her and Huo. They turned out perfect together." Mynh agreed.

"We just have to figure out who the most popular male is in town." Saraynea said in a serious tone.

"I keep hearing the name Longwei when I go out." Huo said.

"Huo!" Feleine growled.

"It's a start." Achamaru said.

"No it's not! Just stop it!" Feleine pushed herself away from Saraynea.

"Feleine?" Saraynea tried to meet her gaze but Feleine turned away. The room had become silent.

"You don't understand." she said in a low voice. "I'm not good enough to be with him." She finished and left the room.

"I think we pushed her a little too hard." Kheiryn said as everyone shared the same guilty expression.

Saraynea stood in front of the door to the bedroom for a moment with her paw in a fist to knock, but she was not sure what to say. She took a deep breath and slowly opened the door enough to see Feleine sitting on her bed facing the window. Saraynea slowly walked in and stood in the middle of the room.

"Can I sit with you?" she asked quietly. Feleine slightly looked over her shoulder and nodded before she looked back out the window. Saraynea was silent as she made herself comfortable next to Feleine, careful to not accidently move her leg or ankle in a way that would hurt. She looked at Feleine who kept

her gaze locked outside. A streak along her cheek showed that she had been crying. "We're all really sorry." Saraynea broke the silence. "We never intended to hurt your feelings."

"I know you didn't mean it. It's just that Longwei is so popular and well, everyone here kind of hates me if you remember."

"You're just shy around others."

"He's the strongest monk in town. Why would he be interested in me?"

"Well you have the looks to start with."

"My fur is grey." Feleine grumbled as she finally turned to face Saraynea. "Like and elder bear."

"I bet you've never noticed how beautiful you look in the moonlight. I slept next to you nearly every night of our travels, so I'd know. Your fur is very soft and warm too." She continued, but Feleine rested her chin in her arms as she looked out the window again. Saraynea leaned close to her ear. "You smell good too." She whispered forcing Feleine to laugh.

"Now you're just being silly."

"Call it what you want, but it's the truth. You doubt yourself so much. I just want to see you be happy." She said as she pressed her cheek against Feleine's.

"I have an amazing family and the best of best friends in the entire world. Of course I'm happy." Feleine said as she wrapped her arms around Saraynea.

Saraynea walked through the town alone after managing to sneak out again. She tried to not push herself too much, but she followed every clue she could find about Longwei by using what she overheard from other females who were clearly turned down by the popular male. She found a large tree and under it sat one of the largest panda she had ever seen, yet he sat with a very relaxed posture and appeared to be trying to meditate while ignoring the flirting from the nearby females. Saraynea quietly approached him and he opened his eyes.

"Ah I know you. You're the shaman who just returned with your team." He greeted in an unexpected friendly tone.

"Yeah that's me. Do you mind if I sit with you for a moment?" Saraynea asked.

"I know you have a mate so I don't mind your company. My name is

Longwei. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I just wanted to ask for your opinion about someone."

"And who would you like to know about? I've lived here my whole life. I pretty much know everyone around."

"I was wondering what you think of Feleine."

"Ah, Feleine." Longwei's lips pulled into a smile. "Has she found a mate yet?"

"Not yet but she does have a crush."

"I'm surprised she's not spending more time out in the town then. Finding a mate is what the season is all about."

"Well, she's extremely shy. Her self-confidence is kind of low."

"She should not at all suffer from lack of confidence. How could she deny that she's beautiful?"

"She doesn't believe others think highly of her fur color."

"Her silver fur? She doesn't think it's attractive? Whoever she has a crush on had better appreciate such a rare fur color."

"But, you do appreciate it."

"So she likes me then?" he asked. Saraynea smiled and he reached into his pocket and handed a blue flower hair pin to her. "Give this to her for me."

"Gladly!" Saraynea took the pin and quickly made her way back home to the others.

"He said what?" Feleine asked as she stared down at the pin in her paws. "No way. About me?"

"Well, look at that. He has a crush on you too." Achamaru said.

"That's perfect! You both like each other, so you can pair up easily!" Ayumei cheered.

"I don't know. He's so popular and all the females like him. Why would he pick me?"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" Saraynea said as she took the pin and stood behind Feleine and placed it in her hair. "There. It looks great!"

"Now we just need to find you something nice to wear." Kheiryn said.

"What's wrong with my clothes?" Feleine asked.

"You're not going out in an everyday outfit! You need something nice! Something to fit the occasion!" Kheiryn argued.

"Well, I might have something. I bought a long time ago, but I never wore it." Feleine said. Kheiryn followed Feleine to her bedroom while the others waited in the den for them to return. After a few moments, Kheiryn reappeared in the doorway.

"Come on." She encouraged to Feleine who was staying away from the doorway.

"I don't know. Maybe I should wear something else?"

"Darling, you look amazing. Come on now." Kheiryn grabbed Feleine's paw and pulled her into the room. The others stared at her in amazement when they saw her in a two-piece light blue dress.

"What do you guys think?" Feleine asked shyly.

"You're so beautiful!" Saraynea said.

"That dress is so pretty! It's perfect for you!" Ayumei added.

"You're definitely ready to pick a mate." Mynh smiled.

"If he says no with you looking this good, there's something wrong with him." Korramaru said. Feleine smiled, but her body language showed that she was still lacking confidence.

"I think you just need to get used to it before you go and say hi to him." Kheiryn said as she pulled Feleine's arms away from her exposed stomach.

"Yeah, I'm certainly not used to wearing something so revealing." Feleine shyly laughed.

"Well, let's get used to it starting right now. The sooner you build up some confidence, the better." Kheiryn took Feleine's arm and walked toward the door.

"Where are we going?"

"Out! Let's show the town how lovely you look."

"Right now? Maybe later?" Feleine said as she stopped walking.

"Why wait? You're already in the dress." Korramaru walked up to her from behind and gently pushed her along.

"Why don't we all go with you?" Mynh suggested.

"Yeah we should all go! I'm sure our support will help you feel better." Ayumei said and she quickly grabbed her sister's crutches so they could follow. Without delay, Saraynea and Huo joined them outside. Feleine glanced around the busy town, hoping that no one would notice her. Suddenly eyes began to look toward her and admiring smiles appeared on the faces of the females who saw her in the dress.

"Nice dress!"

"You look so good today."

"You should wear that dress more often." Feleine was surprised at the compliments she started to receive and her body language began to reflect her growing confidence.

"Look who decided to show her face." A familiar voice hissed. Feleine stared at Lyra who was also dressed up, unlike her friends who stood at her sides. "That dress, it's too pretty for you, Feleine. I am curious though: who are you trying to pair with?"

"I don't like your attitude." Korramaru growled as she took a step forward. The others shared similar angry expressions. Lyra glanced at them and snickered.

"Looks like you've made some friends. That's a shocker." Lyra snorted.

"She's mean." Ayumei said.

"Yeah, what's your problem?" Achamaru asked.

"She's nothing but a bully." Saraynea said causing Lyra to glare back at her. "She's all talk and no fight. I know that much."

"Is that a challenge?" Lyra asked, placing her paws on her hips. "I have to admit, though, I'm surprised that Feleine isn't the one wrapped in bandages from head to toe. Not very attractive for pairing season though."

"I already have a mate." Saraynea snarled as Huo placed his paws on her shoulders to prevent her from trying to fight.

"With an attitude like yours, what makes you think your chances are any better?" Kheiryn asked.

"Are you serious? Personality is the last thing that matters! I'm beautiful and strong. That's all I need to get the best male in town."

"Longwei?" Feleine questioned in disbelief.

"Of course. Why would I waste my time with anyone else?" Lyra replied. A snarl appeared on her face when Feleine laughed.

"Prepared for more denial? He's expressed plenty of times how disinterested he is in you."

"You think you have a better chance than me!?" Lyra snapped.

"Well, he did kind of say it, so yeah, she does." Mynh said.

"Wait, you think Longwei has a crush on you?" Lyra stared at Feleine with a surprised expression. "That's ridiculous!" Lyra laughed.

"How so?" Kheiryn asked.

"Oh please! We're talking about Feleine here! Longwei is the strongest monk ever to be trained in this town. Feleine is, well, Feleine. She never talks to anyone and barely ever stays in town for long before running back home or going to the training grounds. Why would he have any interest in her?" Feleine looked down for a moment, her confidence melting away when her ears perked to the sound of growling coming from both her sides. She quickly singled each one out and knew that all her friends were growling at Lyra's words.

"Know what, Lyra?" Feleine started. "For as long as I can remember, you've always loved to show off to others. I may not have your confidence or leadership, but I have something that you'll never have. I have achieved a goal that you have not."

"Oh really? And what goal is that?"

"I have friends who care about me. I have the one thing we dreamed about every night at the orphanage: a family." Feleine said. Lyra pointed at Fira and Ox. "They only follow you around because they're afraid of you."

"That's not true. You guys have my back, right?" Lyra asked.

"Uhh..." Fira muttered.

"You told us if we ever betrayed you, you'd throw us off the side of the mountain." Ox said.

"They just need to learn to not be afraid of you like I have." Feleine walked up to Lyra. "In no way are you better than me, or them, or anyone in this town, so stop acting like it."

"The next time I see you, it'll be a fight." Lyra growled and turned away. Fira and Ox exchanged glances and slowly followed her. Feleine turned to face her friends who were clearly impressed with her actions.

"Nicely done." A voice said. Feleine turned and saw Longwei walking up to her. "I've been waiting so long for someone to put her in her place. I'm glad you finally stuck up for yourself. That was very brave." He said. Feleine smiled and looked down as her cheeks turned red. "If you're not busy, would you like to take a walk in the forest? It's more peaceful in there than in the busy town."

"Sure." She replied quietly.

"We'll see you back home." Achamaru said.

"You two have fun!" Ayumei cheered.

"Well that was successful. I'm glad." Kheiryn said.

"That Lyra girl though!" Korramaru growled. "I'm glad that worked out too, but if anyone messes with me like that, they get to talk to my blades! I was struggling to not lash out at her."

"Are you planning to do anything special this season?" Achamaru asked Korramaru.

"Me? Nah. I'm pretty happy with how things are right now." The brown bear answered. Kheiryn gently smiled at the answer.

"I agree. I'm in no rush either." Achamaru said.

"Well, Korramaru doesn't have to try to find someone." Ayumei said.

"Huh?" Korramaru questioned.

"I thought you and Kheiryn liked each other?" she asked. Saraynea and Achamaru fought back laughs while Kheiryn and Korramaru blushed. Both seemed equally as surprised by the young red panda's words. "Sara already has one, so that just leaves Mynh then!" Ayumei said and she turned to Mynh whose

gaze was set on something in the distance. "Mynh?"

"Hm?" she quickly turned her head to face Ayumei.

"Are you going to look for a mate?"

"A mate? I've never really thought about it."

"Aw I guess we won't be matchmaking anymore this season." Ayumei turned away. Mynh turned to Saraynea who had a suspicious smile on her face.

"What?"

"Nothing." Saraynea said as she glanced at the redness on Mynh's face. "Come on, we should keep up with them." She said and they made their way toward the others who were waiting for them.

Longwei and Feleine had made their way into the forest where it was quiet. He stopped and glanced around before turning to Feleine and smiled. "I'm glad you like the hairpin." He said.

"It was a very nice gift. Thanks."

"I wanted to give it to you myself, but, I know you're shy and I didn't want to put you on the spot especially since you recently returned after being away for so long."

"No, it's ok. I've just been trying to help my friends recover. They got more beat-up than I did."

"It's great that you've finally made some friends. They seem like a very reliable team, especially Saraynea, which is why I trusted her to deliver the hairpin. It was meant to be a pairing gift if you'd be interested." He said. Feleine looked at him and nodded before looking at the ground. "You did all that talking to Lyra, but you can't talk to me?" he teased, causing Feleine's face to burn.

"It's just that I still can't believe that you chose me."

"I never had anyone else on my mind. If I can't have you for a mate, then I'd rather be alone." He placed a finger under her chin and gently tilted her head up so he could look into her eyes.

"Like every other single girl in this town, of course I've had a crush on you. How could I say no to the coolest and strongest male around?" she said. Longwei smiled and rubbed his nose against hers. She giggled and suddenly her

body froze and her heart raced as she felt his lips against hers. For a moment she still could not believe that he had chosen her, but after accepting his pairing gift and experiencing their first kiss, they were mates. She closed her eyes and returned the kiss. Soon she was able to imagine that they were alone in their own world even though she could not ignore her pounding heart. Her ear automatically perked to a sound, forcing her back into reality. She opened her eyes and glanced to her side. When an unexpected sight was caught from the corner of her vision, she turned her head, eyes wide and cheeks burning. "How long have you all been standing there!?" she asked as the others stood a short distance from where she stood with Longwei.

"Long enough for Korramaru to get teary-eyed." Kheiryn said.

"Look, it was really sweet. I'm happy for her." Korramaru tried to keep her voice from shaking as she quickly rubbed her eyes.

"I thought we were meeting back at home!" Feleine said.

"Did you seriously think we were going to miss your first kiss? Especially after you and Mynh helped pair me with Huo." Saraynea said.

"Where is Mynh?" Feleine asked as she glanced around. Kheiryn pointed to Mynh who was receiving attention from a male just as Feleine was.

"Oh, not thinking about finding a mate huh?" Ayumei called to her. Mynh took a moment to look back at them, shrug, and smile before her mate started to kiss her again. Huo suddenly lifted Saraynea in his arms.

"You haven't gotten off your feet in a while. Would you mind checking the back of my neck? I feel something back there and I can't figure out what it is." He asked. Saraynea reached a paw behind his neck and noticed a small chain traveling down into his shirt.

"What are you wearing?" she asked as she unclipped the clasp and pulled a heart-shaped necklace into her paws. "Huo..." she started as she noticed that one side of the light blue gem had an S engraved on it while the back had an H.

"I know we decided a while ago to stay together, but you didn't think I wouldn't give you a pairing gift at some point did you?"

Huo worked diligently in the kitchen as the others rested. Mynh showed them that her pairing gift was a well-crafted dagger.

"I thought pairing gifts were supposed to be romantic?" Ayumei whispered to Achamaru who smiled and shrugged while Korramaru was clearly impressed. Saraynea got up to head to the bedroom since Feleine had not returned from changing out of her dress. She saw Feleine sitting on her bed staring out the window and made herself comfortable next to her.

"Why are you in here all by yourself?" Saraynea asked.

"Just thinking about some stuff."

"Is today the best day ever or what?"

"It's certainly up there as one of the best, that's for sure."

"If today isn't the best, then what is?"

"Probably the day we met."

"Seriously? When I was exhausted, slightly beaten, and being chased by a crazy clan?"

"I know it's probably surprising." Feleine laughed. "Of course I didn't think so that day, but now I realize how important it was. Sure, there were times where our adventure was very difficult, but I met some really amazing friends, learned a deeper meaning of the importance of my strength, discovered that I can heal, and I certainly wouldn't have been able to say those things to Lyra or even have spoken to Longwei, but all those things happened because I met you."

"Yeah a lot sure did happen. It was fun though. I can't wait for our next adventure together! The whole team together from start to finish!"

"Next adventure? You're far from being well enough to head back out there." Feleine laughed. "I guess wherever you go I have to be there no matter what."

"Really?" Saraynea's expression was bright with excitement.

"Of course. After all, I did promise to be your friend, so I kind of have to look out for you." Feleine smiled and raised her pinky just as she had on the day she agreed to the promise. Saraynea smiled and coiled her pinky around Feleine's.

Dear Reader,

Thanks for reading my book! I sincerely hope that you enjoyed it and will join Saraynea and her team for their future adventures. If you'd like notifications on progress updates and other news about my books, be sure to follow my blog:

https://sarayneabookseries.wordpress.com

If you haven't done so yet, I'd appreciate if you leave a rating/ review. As a self-publishing author, reader ratings are very important for improving the exposure of my books.

Thanks again and know that I immensely appreciate your support.

Natalie Pluchino

## **Return to the FrostPeak Mountains Territory Sample**

Feleine and her opponent breathed heavily as they glared at each other. Ironclaw and Snakestrike sat across from each other on the edge of the arena watching the duel with intense focus. Surrounding the arena was a thick crowd, nearly silent as everyone carefully watched to see who would be victorious after the long and exhausting fight.

Sitting closely together were all her friends: Achamaru and Mynh whispered to each other while Huo, Longwei, and Shadestep were silently focused. Kheiryn chuckled as Ayumei and Korramaru shivered with excitement. They made sure to sit close to the arena so Feleine would know that they were all there to support her during the fight that would decide if she would graduate from the town's academy.

The student charged at Feleine and their fast paced duel continued. Everyone in the audience tensed as the fighting escalated, but none as much as Feleine's friends when they noticed that she was showing signs of her exhaustion and began to struggle to block the strikes of the other student. The moment Feleine's body hit the wooden floor, her opponent backed away a few steps, but remained in a battle-ready stance. If Feleine did not stand soon, she would lose the duel.

She opened her eyes and when her vision steadied, she stared at her friends. Some had unsure expressions while others seemed upset after witnessing her take a beating, but Saraynea's expression stuck out: she was glaring at her. At first, the unexpected look confused her, but Feleine began to sense that Saraynea's expression was ordering her to get up. Even though there were no words, she knew that her friend was telling her stand and keep fighting.

"Do you give up?" Snakestrike questioned. Feleine's opponent snickered, but she stopped and growled as Feleine struggled to get her paws off the floor and stand on her feet. A quick glance showed Feleine that Saraynea's glare had turned into a look of confidence before she had to focus on her challenger again.

The fighting continued with the same level of aggressiveness as it was right before Feleine fell, but rush of energy coursing through her muscles helped Feleine defend herself more effectively. She pulled back her arm and fire swirled around her paw as she struck. The force was enough to send the other student to the floor a short distance away. Feleine watched as she struggled to stand.

"You sure are tougher...than you look." She finished and allowed herself to fall again. The audience cheered at Feleine who was victorious after a long and difficult duel. She turned to look back at her friends who wildly cheered. Feleine smiled at the sight of their energy when Snakestrike placed a paw on her shoulder to get her attention.

"Well done Feleine. That was one of the longest graduation duels I've ever witnessed. As I trained you, you often showed great promise of being one of the best to ever be trained at this academy, but even during that fight, you continued to surprise me. It's an honor to have been one of your teachers." Snakestrike bowed to Feleine, who performed the gesture back.

Soon after her graduation duel, Feleine found herself trapped in a tight hug from Saraynea.

"I'm so happy for you! That was one heck of a fight!" Saraynea's arms tightened around her friend.

"Thanks. I'm glad it's over. I was so nervous about it." Feleine replied.

"We knew you could do it." Korramaru said. "You pushed a monster out of Sara, so I'm pretty sure you could handle nearly anything."

"It took all of us to help her out." Feleine said. "I probably wouldn't have done half as well in that fight if you weren't all there for me."

- "We do make a pretty awesome team." Ayumei smiled.
- "I can approve that." A voice said.
- "Earthfur!" Saraynea greeted. "We did warn you to get your tail there early if you wanted a good seat."
- "Yeah... sorry I wasn't right up front, but I promise I was cheering you on from where I was. As silently as I could of course." Earthfur said as he scratched his neck.
  - "I appreciate that you came at all even though you're on a vacation." Feleine said.
  - "It's nice that you arrived just in time for the ceremony." Kheiryn said.
- "I'm glad I happened to witness it too. It amazes me how you all continue to grow stronger. It's also nice to see that Saraynea has made a full recovery." He said.
  - "Why not join our celebratory dinner?" Huo offered.
- "I don't want to be a burden to you." Earthfur's tone and posture seemed awkward compared to the last time he was with the team. He was acting nothing like when he helped them battle Darkstorm and his corrupted spirit.
  - "A burden? You're like an honorary member of our team." Achamaru said.
  - "A status I look forward to achieving when the opportunity arrives." Shadestep said in a serious tone.
- "Well, being Mynh's mate is a good step I guess." Ayumei smiled. "But, I don't think we'll be on an adventure too soon, so do you really need to always be so heavily geared?" she eyed his dark leather rogue armor.
- "I must always be prepared to face a threat at any time. Now more than ever since I have a mate to protect." Shadestep turned to Mynh. "I searched hard for a worthy mate. I shall hunt for a beast to feed our team."
  - "I was just going to go to the meat shop. It's faster and far less dangerous." Huo said.
  - "I won't be gone for long." Shadestep said.
- "Go get 'em Shade." Mynh smiled, but Shadestep continued to stand still. Earthfur took a step toward him with a curious expression before raising his paw. A gust of wind blew through Shadestep, causing the image to disperse.
- "Impressive technique." Earthfur said. "He is well-practiced. Even I barely felt his footsteps on the ground."
- "I guess I'd better get started with dinner then. Shadestep is a swift hunter." Huo said. "You're more than welcome to join us though." He said to Earthfur before turning and walking toward the academy.
  - "You still get to live in the academy?" Earthfur asked to Feleine.
- "Only for a few more days. Since I've officially graduated, I kind of have to find a new place to live. I guess we all do." She said as she glanced around at everyone.
- "Aw, but I like living together! It'll feel weird living separated after being together for so long." Ayumei whined.
  - "We'll probably just get rooms at the inn. We'll all still be neighbors." Achamaru comforted her sister.
  - "As nice as it sounds, we don't exactly have a steady source of income to pay for rooms." Mynh said.
  - "If this town had a wild side, then I would duel for coin." Korramaru grinned.

"Great Spirits! Dear, I'm sure we can come up with something else." Kheiryn said to Korramaru.

"It's not a big deal. That's how I lived my life for years. The best places are inns with duel arenas! I get to fight, drink, and sleep in one place." Kheiryn smiled at Korramaru's comment.

"Always ready to swing your blades at someone." Kheiryn said. Saraynea smiled as well before looking at Earthfur who seemed to be in a trance.

"Earthfur? Hey, you ok?" Saraynea tried to get his attention.

"Hm? Oh yes, I'm fine. I've just had a lot on my mind lately." He replied.

"This is a pretty busy time in town to try to do some quiet thinking." Feleine said.

"After you all returned here and I went home, my little home in the mountains actually felt too quiet. I already spent so much time on my own up there, so being a busier place is a nice change." He explained.

"Well, if you need anything, just let us know." Saraynea said. Earthfur smiled back and nodded at her. "I'd better get back to Huo and help him." Saraynea started.

"Yeah, I bet he has some massive feast planned to celebrate Feleine's graduation." Achamaru said.

"So we'll see you for dinner?" Ayumei asked to Earthfur.

"It would be rude of me to say no to your offer." He replied. Saraynea looked at him curiously, becoming more worried about what seemed to be upsetting him.

Earthfur sat at the table with his empty dishes and stared at his cup of tea. Most of the others had left the dining room and had gone back out in the town since Feleine's academy room was a tight space to fit everyone at the same time. Saraynea stood next to Huo who was cleaning the dishes.

"I can help." She said.

"No, I got it. Kheiryn wanted to look for herbs in the forest. You should join her and the others." He replied.

"You cooked that entire meal on your own. I can at least help with the cleanup. It's not a big deal."

"You've only been bandage-free for a few days. I just don't want you to push yourself too soon." He said with a concerned look on his face.

"I just spent the last few *months* under everyone's extremely intensive care. I'm all better now."

"Your friends healed your stomach too?" Earthfur asked.

"Well..." Saraynea turned to face him and lifted her shirt to reveal her stomach. Earthfur frowned at the sight of her scar. "Feleine and Kheiryn tried really hard to get rid of it, but I don't mind it too much. It hasn't hurt me in a long time, so sometimes I forget it's even still there."

"That's good at least." He said as he stood up and brought his cup to the sink. "Thank you for the meal." He said to Huo before leaving the room.

"I guess we could find Kheiryn and see if she needs any help. "Feleine suggested to Saraynea. "After all, it's thanks to her selling potions that we have extra coin to use." Saraynea nodded and they left the academy.

Feleine and Saraynea walked closely together through the town toward the path leading to the mountain forest. Feleine watched Saraynea for a moment who was staring toward the ground.

"You ok?" Feleine asked.

"Earthfur has been acting weird since he came to town." Saraynea replied without moving her gaze.

"Well, Earthfur is here on a sort of vacation, right? So I guess something has been bothering him to make him want to travel."

"If he would just talk to us, then maybe we can help him."

"Well here's your chance to find out." Feleine said as she and Saraynea noticed Earthfur walking with his bag over his shoulder.

"Earthfur?" Saraynea managed to get his attention and they approached each other.

"I guess it's good that I ran into you. I'm going to be leaving." He said with the same unsure expression he often had since being in town.

"Already? It still feels like you just got here." Saraynea said.

"I had been on my own in the mountains for a long time before you and your friends came along. After you left, I felt a loneliness that I haven't felt for years. I decided to visit and make sure that you were all ok, but I still felt that loneliness. After seeing Longwei, Huo, and Shadestep be so attentive to their mates, it made me want to be with the female I fell in love with." Earthfur explained.

"Oh, I remember. You told me that story when you were training me." Saraynea said.

"Yes, that female. You remind me of her in a way. I waited in those mountains for a sign that it was time for me to return to her. Maybe it's time I stopped waiting."

"That's so sweet! You're going back to find her?" Saraynea asked with excitement.

"Hopefully she still remembers me." He sighed.

"Why wouldn't she? She fell in love with you too."

"I didn't even know you had a mate." Feleine said.

"It's complicated." He replied.

"He fell in love with a princess." Saraynea explained.

"Oh wow." Feleine's expression became more curious.

"She had his cub." Saraynea added.

"That is complicated!" Feleine replied.

"Well, it doesn't help that you got the short version of the story." Earthfur said.

"We can give her the full story on the way." Saraynea smiled.

"What?" both Feleine and Earthfur looked curiously at Saraynea.

"You had my back during my adventure. Now I want to be there to help you." Saraynea said.

"Sara, this is between him and his mate. If he wants to do this alone, we should..." Feleine started, but was quickly interrupted by Saraynea.

"She's a princess! Who lives in a temple! Come on, you know that sounds exciting."

"You just want to go on an adventure." Feleine teased.

"That too." Saraynea admitted in a low voice. "After months of being stuck in bed, I really need to stretch my legs and get back out there. It'll be like our own vacation. You just graduated so you deserve a chance to relax and see something new. So we get to have a new adventure and we'll be there if Earthfur needs us."

"I don't think anything can change your mind at this point anyway." Feleine laughed.

"It is a very pretty town high in the snowy mountains. It would certainly be a change of scenery." Earthfur said. "If you really want to go, I'll wait until tomorrow morning so you have time to gather your supplies."

"We'll meet you right where the path leads into the forest." Saraynea said. Earthfur smiled and nodded before they turned away.

Saraynea quickly found Huo inside Feleine's academy room.

"Huo!" she greeted with excitement. "Pack your pans and spices!"

"Are we going somewhere?" he asked.

"An adventure! We're going on another adventure! All of us to territory in the snowy mountains. Earthfur is going to guide us."

"Well that's exciting." Huo smiled. "When are we going?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow morning!?" he questioned with shock.

Earthfur stared at the group that stood before him on the path right outside the town. "Great Spirits! All of you?"

"What did you expect?" Korramaru asked as she made sure that Stormfang's saddle was secure.

"No offense, but I don't think that dragon can even carry everyone." Earthfur said.

"Stormfang? He's just carrying me and Kheiryn." Korramaru replied.

"What about the rest of you? I was going to ride Strongfeather and see if we could get help from the spirits to bring Saraynea and Feleine. I didn't realize *everyone* was coming along." Earthfur continued to stare at the group.

"Of course we're all going! We always stick together." Ayumei cheered.

"This is going to take longer than I expected. If we're going to walk, we're going to need to come up with a plan of our travel. It's not a short trip to the territory." He explained.

"Oh, don't worry, we won't have to walk. We'll all fly right behind you." Saraynea said.

"Fly on what?" Earthfur questioned. Saraynea glanced to Mynh who reached out with one of her paws. A dark blue-black aura formed around her arm as she summoned Shadowtalon. The massive raven spread his wings and stretched. Achamaru summoned Armorscale and Ayumei happily greeted Twilight when he arrived through his connection with her. Even the massive bat, Bloodfang, was summoned by Kheiryn.

"Why don't you summon your guardian spirit?" Earthfur asked as he saw Saraynea and Huo climb onto Bloodfang's back.

"Hototo can't fly." Saraynea said with a forgiving smile. "I'll summon him when we get there so he can sightsee with everyone too."

"So, what do we hold onto?" Huo asked. Saraynea laughed in response.

"I hold the bat spirit, and you hold onto me." She turned her head to smile at him.

"What!? Are you sure about this?"

"Don't worry. Hototo may not be able to fly, but he sure can run. I have plenty of experience riding

spirits." She said and Huo gently placed his paws on her shoulders. "Huo, you'll have to hold on tighter than that."

"Well, I don't want to hurt you." He shuffled closer to her. When everyone agreed that they were ready to take to the sky, the spirits leaped up flapped their wings with great vigor. The sudden and great amount of turbulence forced Huo to cling to Saraynea as tightly as he could. When the ascent was finished, everyone relaxed their grip on the spirits except for Huo who even still had his eyes shut.

"Huo?" Saraynea asked.

"Are we dead yet?" Huo questioned.

"Far from it. Come on, open your eyes. How many others get to say they've experienced a view like this?" she replied. Huo slowly opened his eyes and lessened his grip on her as he tried to adjust himself before glancing around in every direction.

"Ok...It's not so bad once you're in the air." Huo relaxed his grip. Bloodfang's body shook as he flapped his wings, causing Huo to latch onto Saraynea again.

As the team neared their destination, the change in climate was noticeable. Chill winds blew through their fur and the green of the forests and mountains was covered in a thick layer of snow. The spirits closely followed Earthfur and Strongfeather and a sense of excitement and curiosity radiated from everyone when a steady decent begun.

"There it is." Earthfur said. "The very town called FrostPeak. That's where the very temple that leads the FrostPeak Mountain territory is. It's been such a long time..." he finished and led the spirits to land a short distance outside the wall that surrounded the town, except for the back where the temple was located since it was protected by the mountain it was nestled in.

"Why do we have to land out here?" Ayumei asked.

"This isn't just a regular town. If we fly in there on these spirits, they'll take it as an aggressive entry. We will enter safely through the gates." He explained. Saraynea took a deep breath of the crisp air.

"I love it already and we're not even in the town yet." She said.

"I'll let you all do some sightseeing if you'd like. I'm going to set up our rooms at the inn." Earthfur said as he removed himself from Strongfeather's back, signaling for the others to stand on the ground as well.

"The inn? Shouldn't you visit the temple before anything else?" Saraynea asked.

"I'd like to get settled in first. Maybe I'll ask around and see how the town has been for the last few years." He said.

"I wouldn't mind looking around first." Achamaru said. The others nodded in agreement and they entered they stepped through the gates and inside the busy town of FrostPeak.

The team was quickly intrigued by the many shops and stalls, stopping at nearly each one to see styles of supplies, food, and clothing that were native to the much colder climate than they were used to. As they walked passed an alley, a stranger rammed into Saraynea, and they both to fall over onto the ground.

"Saraynea! Are you ok?" Huo quickly placed his paws under her arms to lift her up. As she leaned up from his help, Saraynea noticed some jewelry laying between her and the stranger that crashed into her. He leaned up as well and glanced between her and the stolen items when another paw grabbed it before helping his friend up.

"Run fool! And watch where you're going this time!" he ordered and the two continued to run through the crowds. Saraynea lifted herself up and chased after them.

"Sara, wait!" Feleine called. "I have a bad feeling about this." She and the others ran after Saraynea.

Saraynea carefully avoided crashing into the citizens that lunged out of the way of the thieves who preferred to shove anyone or anything that was in their way. She reached out with her paw and turned a patch of snow in front of them into ice, causing them to slip and lose the jewelry again.

When one of them reached for it, three arrows that landed in the dirt forced him to back away and look up at the roof they came from. Mynh already had another arrow readied. Ayumei created a small magic dome over them to prevent them from running away. Gasping from the chase, Saraynea picked up the stolen items and noticed several guards who were approaching the scene. She held out her paw to a guard who took the jewelry, but she was forced to back away when the blade of a glaive was brought close to her face. As she backed away, she noticed that other guards were doing the same to her friends and they were forced to stand close together with their paws in the air as they were surrounded by angry guards.

"Yeah, this is bad." Huo said.

"We helped to stop them!" Saraynea snapped.

"Does it look like they appreciate it?" Korramaru said, clearly filled with as much anger.

"This is just a misunderstanding." Kheiryn started.

"Enough!" the lead guard yelled. "Take the thieves to the dungeon." he ordered to some of the others. "We'll have to find out what we have to do with the rest of you."

"Won't you at least listen to us?" Achamaru asked.

"What your punishment is depends on what the advisor and princess say."

"Punishment!?" Saraynea questioned. "If we hadn't helped, they probably would have gotten away!"

"Be quiet!" the lead guard demanded. "You'd better watch that attitude when speaking to our leader."

The guards tied their paws behind their backs before pushing them through the town. The entire time Saraynea struggled and fought with the guards while her friends did their best to cooperate. After being shoved up the stairs of the temple, they were forced to their knees.

"Well, what do we have here?" a female panda asked with a grin on her face as she looked at Saraynea who was forced in front of her friends since the lead guard was the one who held her.

"We ran into them while chasing after a duo of thieves. They seem to have strong abilities and were not able to resist using them. Being that they are a large and unfamiliar group, they could be a threat if they lash out again." The lead guard explained as he held a tight grip on Saraynea who continued to struggle.

"I see. This one looks especially feisty." The panda approached and looked down at Saraynea who glared back. "This is an easy fix. Throw them in the dungeon until I figure out what to do with them."

"You're not even going to bother to listen to what happened?" Saraynea snapped. "We helped your guards! I don't understand your reason to even arrest us!" Saraynea growled.

"Watch your tongue, girl. I'm the last one you want to make angry since I'm the one who will be thinking very hard about what to do with each of you." She tapped Saraynea's nose with one of her claws.

"Don't forget that your job is to *advise* what to do with them." A new voice said. A red panda whose demeanor and dress easily showed that she was the princess before anyone even addressed her.

"Yes, of course, but they viciously lashed out in public. They could have hurt someone!" the panda argued.

"Look, if you want us to, we'll leave!" Saraynea said. "I don't even want to be here anymore seeing how you treat those who try to help."

"How dare you not only disrespect her territory, but speak to our princess with that tone!" the panda growled, but the princess raised her paw to silence her advisor.

"Sara, I know you're mad, but snapping won't help." Feleine said. Saraynea snorted in response and stared at the ground.

"You're Sara?" the princess asked, but Saraynea did not reply. "Please, allow her to stand." The guard pulled Saraynea to her feet though she kept her gaze locked to the ground. The princess gently held Saraynea's chin and forced her to look up. "Don't be afraid. We're not going to throw you in the dungeon." She said with a gentle smile. With most her rage comforted, Saraynea's ears flattened and she tried to look down again, embarrassed of her recent actions.

"Uhm, Princess, do you really think it's safe for our citizens to just let them go?" the advisor asked.

"Myra." The princess started in a stern tone. "If you lash out first, expect to be lashed at in return. I've never seen them before, but they don't seem like a threat to me. Especially young Sara here."

"Princess, I think you're letting them go to easily here." Myra said. "Just think about..." she tried to continue but was interrupted when everyone focused on a growling sound that was quickly approaching. A large white tiger ran up to Saraynea and began to frantically sniff her. She wanted to move away from the curious tiger, but the guard still held her in place.

"Frostfur! Stop that!" a panda said as she grabbed his reins and pulled him away. "I'm so sorry about this, Lily. He just suddenly ran off." She said but the tiger pulled away and continued to investigate Saraynea. He paused for a moment and stared at her before his sniffing was replaced by rapid licks to her face.

"What is he doing?" Myra sighed. "Yin, control your tiger!"

"He really likes her for some reason." Yin said. Frostfur backed away and turned his head to pull something out from under his saddle. Saraynea noticed deep sadness in the faces of the tiger's owner as well as the princess when he held a small blanket in his mouth. He approached Saraynea again and held the blanket out to her. Lily gently took the blanket from him and stared at it for a moment.

"Sara..." she started, but briefly paused. "Is that a nickname? Would your full name happen to be Saraynea?" she asked, causing shock to the entire team.

"How would you know that?" Saraynea asked. Again, everyone became distracted by calls, but this time the voice was familiar.

"Excuse me please! I'm so sorry!" Earthfur said as he approached the guards. "How did you all get into so much trouble!?" he growled at the team before turning to Lily. "They're with me. Whatever they did, I will take responsibility for."

"Earthfur!" Lily said as a smile formed on her face before she rushed to hug him. "After all this time... I feared that something had happened to you."

"I'm glad to see that you're also doing well. Again, I'm really sorry for any trouble they caused." He said.

"Oh, there's no trouble." Lily turned to the guards. "Release them." She ordered, and their ropes were cut and the guards left them.

"Princess, I don't think this is a very good idea." Myra glared at Saraynea.

"Myra, you can go. I'd like to talk with them." Lily said.

"What!? I can't just leave you with these dangerous strangers!" Myra replied in shock.

"Yin is here. You can return to your own duties." Lily said, causing Myra to leave after a short delay.

"So you really know each other?" she asked and glanced from Earthfur to Saraynea and her team.

"Well, only for a little while. Do you recognize them?" he asked.

"Earthfur, I believe that she is our daughter." She said in a low voice.

"Your...daughter?" Korramaru questioned.

"Is it true, Sara?" Mynh asked.

"It can't be." Saraynea said. "Sorry, but I've never been here before. I ran away from an orphanage when I was really small. I never had a family as a cub." She explained.

"Do you really think it's possible?" Yin asked to Lily.

"Frostfur matched the scent. We need to talk. All of us. Please come with me." Lily said and walked into the temple with the other following her.