



Saraynea Return
to the Frost Peak Mountains Territory
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Past

Part 1

A panda, still young enough to be called a cub, ran through the crowds as fast as she could with the stolen bread in her paws. Behind her, she could hear the town guards yelling as they chased her. When a guard came charging toward her from the front, she made a sharp turn down an alley and followed the narrow path. It brought her to a dead end, but she was able to easily climb on top of the stacked crates to make her way over the wall. She took a few needed breathes before she heard the guards climbing on the boxes behind her. She prepared to run again, but a voice caught her attention.

“This way!” a voice called to her. She turned and saw a head wrapped with a scarf sticking out from the window of an abandoned building. “Some of the guards are coming from the other end of the alley to trap you.” The young female reached out with her small red-furred paw. The panda reluctantly reached for it. The stranger leaned out the window and grabbed her paw to pull her inside.

The building was dark and many crates and wood stacks were scattered around. The panda took a moment to get a good look at the female who helped her. Her red fur and small size easily revealed that she was a red panda cub. The red-fur quickly made her way behind a large stack of crates and pushed against one. As she pushed it, a hatch became visible which the red-fur pulled open. “Go!” she ordered. The panda took several steps down before turning to see the stranger close the hatch above her and pull on a rope. A scratching sound could be heard from above.

That rope must be attached to the bottom of the crate. Clever way to hide the doorway. The panda smiled, impressed that the red-fur knew of a secret passage.

The red-fur walked passed her in silence and led her down a dark and dusty tunnel. At the end was a wooden wall which the red-fur easily pulled away, revealing a small storage room. After they walked in, she pulled the wooden cover back over the tunnel entrance.

“This is the storage room for the tavern.” The red-fur started. “You should be safe if you stay here for a while before heading out. I actually have to get going. Before I go, I’d like to know your name.”

“I’m Yin.” The panda said.

“Yin.” The red-fur repeated. “I’ll remember that.”

“And you are...?” Yin asked.

“It’s a secret.” Yin could see that the red panda smiled under her scarf. “I’ll tell you if I see you again. I’m sure we’ll meet again soon enough.” The red-fur smiled and made her way through the cellar door back outside. Yin stayed in the basement to rest and eat her bread.

Yin carefully snuck around the temple grounds. She knew her mission was risky, but the night was dark and she had studied the routes the guards made around the grounds many times. With so many guards on the ground floor, she knew she had a better chance climbing into the room on the side of the temple. When she saw her chance, she climbed up a tall tree and used a branch to get to a window before the guards returned with their lanterns. Once inside, she stood still for a moment and studied her surroundings. A beam of moonlight broke through a cloud and reflected off of something on the desk across from the bed. Yin approached it and held the white tiger pendant in her paws. She had never seen something so beautiful.

“Hi there.” A young voice greeted. Yin quickly turned and saw a young red panda cub sitting up in her bed. Her bedside lantern was suddenly lit. She was not sure what to do or where to go. The temple was surrounded by patrolling

guards that would come charging in if the red-fur cub yelled out. Yin was amazed that the red-fur did not call out, but just sat there with a gentle smile on her face. She got out of the bed to approach Yin and held out her open paw. Yin slowly placed the pendant in her paw, praying to the spirits that she would not cry for help once she got her necklace back. “You don’t have to look so frightened. I’m not going to call the guards. I saved you from the town guards, so why would I try to get you caught by ones much tougher than they are?”

“What are you talking about? I’ve never seen you before.” Yin said, still keeping her guard up.

“You don’t recognize me?” After receiving a confused expression, the red-fur turned, reached under her bed, and pulled out a cloak which she wrapped around herself. “Better? Or do I need the scarf as well?”

“You’re the one who helped me.” Yin remembered. “You did say that if we met again, you’d finally tell me your name.”

“My name is Lily.” The red-fur answered cheerfully.

“Lily? You mean like *Princess Lily*?”

“That’s me.” Lily smiled.

“Why would the princess help a thief like me?”

“It’s my job to watch out for all of my citizens. That includes you.”

“Your job? You’re just a cub!”

“If I’m a cub then how would you describe yourself?” Lily snickered. Yin knew that she was slightly older than Lily, but she always thought of herself to be mature since her lifestyle forced her to become independent at a young age.

“How could you have so many responsibilities like that? Isn’t that the job of your parents?”

“You don’t know? My parents...they died a few years ago.” Lily’s ears

dropped as she shoved her scarf under her bed again.

“You have to run this place all by yourself?” Yin asked in a sad tone.

“I have my advisor to help out, but she can be a little rough sometimes.” Lily knelt on the floor.

“I’m surprised that you’re allowed outside the temple since you’re so young.” Yin sat in front of Lily.

“Oh, I’m not allowed to leave without some guards to watch over me.” Lily’s smile returned. “What do you think the cloak is for?”

“You sneak out?” Yin began to grow more curious and comfortable.

“Of course. It’s much more fun.” Yin was surprised at Lily’s rebellious personality.

“You’re...weird.” Yin said. Lily laughed at the comment.

“I guess I’m not what’s expected of when it comes to being a princess. I like you. You’re funny.”

“I’m sure I’m not like your other friends though.”

“I don’t have any other friends.” Yin was surprised that Lily continued to smile after her sad statement. “My advisor says that having friends isn’t important for a princess. I’m glad you managed to sneak in here though. I finally have someone to talk to.”

“Your advisor sounds like a pain.”

“Since there’s no king or queen to run this territory, and because I’m too young, I don’t have a lot of control over certain things. I just have to deal with her since I don’t gain a higher level of control over her until I’m married.”

“That’s rough. How do you put up with it all?”

“I guess because I just have to. I’m not completely powerless though. I

have some control when it comes to what to build in the territory, the status of the relationships with our allies, bigger stuff like that. It's the smaller things that I can't do much about, like taking a walk through my own town. Amazingly it's the smaller things that are the most annoying." Lily's ears caught the sound of footsteps in the hallway outside her room. "You have to go. The guards are making their rounds. Be careful though. I don't want them to catch you." Yin nodded and walked toward the window. "Hey, will you come back tomorrow night?"

"I guess if you really want me to." Yin's response lit up Lily's eyes.

"Thank you. And here, I want you to keep this." Lily tossed the white tiger necklace to Yin, who was shocked to have it back in her paws. "I'm sure you could sell that for some coin. It's not that valuable to me."

"Thanks Lily. I promise I'll visit you tomorrow night." Yin smiled before climbing back outside.

Lily sat up in her bed with the bedside candle lit, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the rogue. She hoped that the promise was true and if Yin was able to sell the pendant to buy herself something to aid in her lifestyle. The curtains gently moved in the wind near the window that she left open to make it easier for her to get inside. Suddenly, the young panda appeared through the curtains with the tiger pendant around her neck.

"You haven't sold it yet?" Lily asked.

"Oh, right. I didn't really feel like it." Yin replied as she stood at the foot of the bed. "I don't really plan to sell it anyway."

"Why not? I thought it would've helped."

"I appreciate it..." Yin lifted the pendant in her paw and stared at it. "But, I felt weird selling the only thing I was ever given."

"You may keep it then. I don't need it back. I have more to give you

tonight.” Lily got out of her bed and reached under her bed. She pulled out a large tray with several covered bowls. “I thought you’d be hungry, so I held onto some food for you.” Yin sat in front of the tray and lifted the covers, revealing food of a quality she never thought she’d eat. Without a delay, she dug into the feast, trying to get as much food into her stomach as quickly as possible. Suddenly she stopped and stared at the tray.

“Why are you doing so much for me?” Yin asked.

“Because I want to. You’re my first friend ever, so I want to make sure I do a good job at being your friend.”

“I’m a *rogue*. I cheat, lie, and steal. You’re a princess. Why would you want to choose someone like me to be friends with?”

“You said that I was strange, but when I gave you a valuable pendent to sell, you kept it. To me, *you’re* weird.” Lily laughed. “I may be nothing like what you expected from a princess, but you don’t completely match the usual description of a rogue either. We’re really not that different.” Comforted by Lily’s words, Yin continued to eat. Lily’s ears perked and she turned her head toward the door. “Hide!” she ordered and shoved the tray under her bed again. Yin quickly hid herself under the bed as well. The door opened and she saw a pair of black-furred feet walk in and approach Lily.

“Lily, what are you doing out of bed?” a female asked in an angry voice.

“Sorry, Advisor Myra. I’m just not that tired right now I guess.” Lily replied in a polite voice.

“I thought I heard voices.”

“Oh, I was just talking to some spirits.” Lily nervously replied.

“I thought only shamans could hear the spirits? In that case, I wouldn’t have heard a voice other than your own right?”

“I...I guess so.”

“Maybe you should stop *guessing* and give me some honest answers... like what that smell is. Are you keeping food in here? You’ll attract rodents!”

“It was just some leftovers from dinner. I thought it would have been better that I finish it instead of wasting it.”

“Well, if you’re done, then I’ll take it away now before something else finds it.” she said and knelt down and reached under the bed. Yin backed away from the searching paw and gently nudged the tray forward, allowing the advisor to take it. “Anything else that you might be hiding from me?” Yin listened, but did not hear Lily respond. “Lily...” the advisor softened her voice as she sat on the bed. “I know that I can never replace your parents, but I am doing my best to raise you as my own.” Yin rolled her eyes at the sound of the advisor’s fake tone. “I want you to know that you never ever have to hide anything from me. Your parents trusted me as the advisor of this temple. Until you are old enough to run this territory on your own, it is my job now to run it while also making sure that you grow into a worthy ruler. If you’re keeping secrets from me, then clearly we have a trust issue.”

“Not at all, Advisor!” Lily quickly said. “I trust you.”

“Then tell me the truth.” The advisor leaned toward Lily. “Who were you talking to?” The advisor’s voice began to grow cold again.

“The spirits. There isn’t even anyone else here.” Yin could hear worry growing in Lily’s voice.

“I heard *two* voices Lily.”

“It was me. We were playing a game. They’re my friends.” Yin saw the advisor stand again as well as Lily’s feet shuffle uncomfortably. After a moment of silence, a loud slap caused her body to slightly jerk.

“You need to get your priorities in order. You don’t need to practice your

shaman abilities so much and you don't need friends. Understand?"

"Yes, Advisor." Lily said in a low voice. After the advisor finally left the room, Yin crawled out from under the bed and turned to see Lily lying on her bed, holding a paw to her cheek.

"What was that!?" Yin tried to keep her voice low.

"*That* was my advisor."

"Is she always that mean?"

"I've never seen her any other way to be honest."

"*Myra...*" Yin scowled. "I don't like her." Lily giggled at the comment, but Yin could still see that she was upset. "Shouldn't you tell someone that she hit you though?"

"Tell who? She has the highest authority in the temple. No matter who I tell, she would eventually find out that I said something. It's honestly not worth it. I'm sorry that you even had to see that."

"I don't understand how you're the princess and you have no say in anything!"

"That's how royalty works. Trust me, she made me read the books over and over."

"Like royalty guides or something?"

"Pretty much." Lily stood up and grabbed a book from the bookshelf next to her bed and placed it on the bed before sitting on top again. "There's one at least. It explains the members of the temple, both of royal blood and the workers like the guards and advisors and how much control they have based on certain conditions." She pushed the book toward Yin, who blankly stared at the cover. "You can touch it you know."

"Yeah I know. It's just...I have no reason to. I have no idea how to read."

Yin admitted.

“You never learned?” Lily stared at Yin who was clearly embarrassed. “Well, I can try to teach you if you’d like. I’m afraid that it may not be the most interesting material, but you’ll learn two things at once.” Lily patted the bed for Yin to sit next to her.

Yin continued to visit Lily every night. They talked, learned more about each other, and Yin continued to learn how to read as well as how the members of the temple were organized and what their roles were. The more time they spent together, the closer they bonded. They avoided several close calls with the advisor as she would often check in on Lily, claiming to have heard voices in the room when she should be sleeping. Most nights, Lily would allow Yin to sleep under her bed which, while not the most comfortable, was still better than sleeping outside in the cold. Soon, Yin spent every morning and night with Lily, being fed breakfast and dinner while spending the rest of her time back in the town so she would not get caught by the temple guards. Yin viewed their friendship like a deal: she would get food and shelter at night in exchange for being there for Lily and being someone she could talk to. Her favorite job became making Lily laugh as often as possible since she felt bad about how stressed she was.

One night, Yin lay under Lily’s bed as usual, but suddenly awoke while the room was still shrouded in darkness. When she opened her eyes, she saw light from under the door and heard voices though she could not understand what was being said. When she was sure that she recognized the advisor’s voice, she crawled out and pressed her ear against the door.

“Quietly! The last thing we need is for the princess to wake up. Come on now.” The advisor said. Yin’s fur stood as she got a bad feeling that the advisor, who was usually cruel to Lily, was plotting something behind her back. She opened the door just enough to see several shadows heading down a hallway.

Yin quietly exited the room and gently closed the door before following the light that would lead her to wherever the advisor and her guards were going. She grew more curious and suspicious when the advisor and her group headed down stairs leading into the basement of the temple. She carefully followed them through the cold and dark hallways of the basement. With no guards patrolling the lower level of the temple, Yin was able to focus on keeping with up with advisor.

“Why do we have to come all the way down here?” a guard whined.

“Yeah this place makes my fur stand...and not because it’s colder down here!” another added in a shaky voice.

“It’s a basement.” Myra snapped. “And we come down here because others rarely use these hallways. Some have been abandoned for years.” Myra said and they continued until they arrived at their destination and opened the wooden door. When they entered a room, Yin was able to hear them by standing against the wall close to the door. “What have you come up with?” the advisor asked.

“Well...” answered a voice followed by the sound of small glass vials being placed on a table. “Some are certainly stronger than the others, but I don’t think we should go too strong just yet. She needs a clear mind for the first step in the process.”

“But they each create the same illness?” Myra asked.

“Yes. They only differ in strength. So we could start with the weakest just to make her feel unwell at first and move onto making her bedridden when you would have her write the document. When that’s done we move onto the *really* strong stuff to finish her off.”

“Then the temple will be mine.” The advisor’s words sent a shiver up Yin’s spine.

“But...” a new voice started. “We know that you’ve been having some trust issues with the cub. Will she really hand over her entire temple to someone she

does not trust?”

“I’ve been working on that. I get the feeling that something is interfering with my plans. I just can’t figure out what.” Myra said in a low voice.

“She is a shaman. Maybe the spirits are talking to her.” A guard suggested.

“Even if she is, when she becomes sick, she won’t have the strength to communicate with them. At that point, she’ll be defenseless and will have no one else to go to but me. This will be just as easy as it was getting the king and queen out of the way.”

She murdered the king and queen! Yin realized. And now she wants to murder Lily as well!

“How’d you get in here!?” A voice yelled. Yin turned and saw a large guard pointing his glaive at her. The guards quickly reacted and lunged to catch Yin, but she was fast and ran toward the stairs leading back up toward Lily while dodging the guards’ attempts to capture her. As Myra’s guards yelled, more from around the temple began to join the chase.

“What’s going on?” Lily asked as she leaned out of her room. “Yin?” After seeing Lily, Yin had no idea what to do. She had just discovered a horrible plan that she needed to tell her, but the scenario was not working in her favor. She also could not run and leave her friend, so instead she just froze. One of Myra’s guards aggressively grabbed her arm, twisting it and causing Yin to wince in pain. “Wait! Leave her alone!” Lily ordered, but the guards ignored her as the advisor ran up to her.

“Are you alright Princess? I don’t know how this dirty rogue managed to get inside, but I promise I will have her executed for trespassing right away.” The advisor said.

“Just listen to me! You don’t understand!” Lily tried to explain, but the advisor ignored her.

“Throw her in the dungeon. I will prepare the execution orders.”

“You cannot issue execution orders without my permission!” Lily growled, finally getting the attention from everyone around, including the advisor who slowly turned.

“I know execution may seem like a strong reaction, but you need to understand that I cannot just ignore this.” Myra said.

“I may not be ready to lead this temple on my own yet, but I am still the princess and you cannot complete executions without my agreement! She is my friend and I won’t let you hurt her.”

“Your friend? Lily, you’re the princess and she’s just a...a dirty, disrespectful...”

“I said let her go. Ignoring the command of a royal is the only crime taking place right now. She didn’t break in tonight. I let her come inside.” Lily’s tone was serious and strong, reminding the guards of their place and allowing Yin to stand near her.

“How could you do such a thing? You endangered your life by letting her in!” the advisor glared at Yin who pulled back her lips into a snarl in response. Lily put her paw on Yin’s chest.

“Stop it. You can’t threaten the advisor or the guards.” Yin knew that Lily was not scolding her, but was trying to protect her. Executing what she had been learning from Lily, she placed her paws together and bowed to the advisor despite how much she hated showing any sign of respect toward her. “Others are trying to sleep and I don’t want my guards scattered at night. Everyone should get back to their posts and patrols.”

“What about her?” Myra pointed at Yin.

“She is my friend and a friend to the temple. She can come and go as she pleases. Tomorrow I will give her a tour and introduce her to all of the members

of the temple.” Lily replied.

“Fine.” Myra snorted. “I hate the idea of a rogue staying in our sacred temple, but she should at least be given a job to perform so that she can at least benefit us somehow.”

“Personal bodyguard.” Lily quickly stated.

“What!? I will not allow it!” Myra growled.

“As my advisor, I understand that you want to contribute your opinion, but my decision is final.” Lily turned to return to her room with Yin close behind her. With her official statements, the temple guards made their way back toward their patrols, while Myra’s guards remained by her. Yin quickly turned her head to stick out her tongue at the advisor, satisfying her need to let the advisor know she had won. The advisor replied by viciously baring her fangs before walking away with her guards.

“She’s crazy.” Yin said as she stared at the closed door.

“Hey.” Lily said, causing Yin to turn to her. Lily placed her paws on Yin’s shoulders and gave a quick, strong bite to one of her ears.

“Ow! What was that for!?” Yin asked, but Lily tightly wrapped her arms around her.

“You have no idea how close that was. You’re the only friend I’ve ever had. I don’t want to lose you.” Lily continued to hug Yin.

“It’ll take more than a mean advisor to keep us apart.” Yin tried to cheer up Lily. “I guess things are going to be different from now on.”

“Well, the good news is that you don’t have to hide anymore. But, now you’re my bodyguard so you’re going to need some training...and armor and even some blades. I kind of threw a major responsibility on your shoulders, but it was the only thing I could do.” Lily’s tone became apologetic, but Yin smiled at

her.

“I don’t mind. If I have to stay here, I can’t think of any other role I’d want to take. I’ll protect you no matter what.” Yin said.

After several months, Yin was a fully respected member of the temple, though she kept a strong rivalry with the advisor, who she strongly believed was the greatest threat to Lily. Yin spent a lot of time to practice and become a skilled fighter with a dagger and short sword at her waist at all times.

One day, Lily brought her to the tiger dens where recently born cubs were about to begin their training to become powerful and loyal partners for temple workers.

“They’re so cute! And there’re so many of them!” Yin said as she followed Lily.

“Soon, they’ll be picked by new members of the temple and then their training will begin. The bond between the tiger and rider is extremely important.” Lily explained.

“Is there a reason why we’re even over here now?” Yin asked, but Lily did not answer and she began to glance around. When she found her target, she picked up a cub and brought it to Yin.

“This is the only white cub born from this season. I want you to have him as your partner.”

“Me? Seriously?”

“You’re a warrior of the temple now, so you need a tiger.” Lily placed the cub in Yin’s arms. “The pairings don’t actually start until next week, but I wanted to make sure I gave this cub to you since he would have been the first one taken.” Yin listened, but she did not take her eyes off the cub. He stared back at her with the same expression, as if he was studying her too.

Part 2

“Faster Frostfur! Come on!” Yin cheered and she rode her white tiger from the valley back up the mountain path leading to the town.

“Hopefully no one noticed that we were gone.” Lily said, holding her hood over her head while her scarf was wrapped around her neck.

“If anything, I’m with you, so they shouldn’t have a problem. Besides, Frostfur needed the exercise. I don’t know why we didn’t just tell the guards now that I think about it.”

“Sneaking out will always be more fun than telling them that I want to go out! I’d rather hang out with you instead of being surrounded by guards.”

“You haven’t changed at all.” Yin laughed.

“Neither have you, but that’s a good thing. I hoped you’d stay the same after I gave you the position of my bodyguard.”

“How would that change me?”

“I don’t know. I was afraid that you’d become super mature or something from it. We were so little, so I still wanted you to be fun, you know?”

“When have I ever shown to know the meaning of being mature?” Yin said causing Lily to laugh. Once they made it to the town, they tried to be more quiet since sneaking around was hard when Yin was known for her white tiger. They paused for a moment near the back of a building, allowing Frostfur to take some breaths. A large clump of snow slipped from the corner of the roof and landed on Yin’s head. “Really?” she growled and shook her head. Lily giggled as she used her claws to remove any remaining snow from her friend’s hair.

“Help! Thief!” a voice called, catching the attention of Lily and Yin.

Frostfur took a few steps forward so they could get a better view of the road. A bear with a satchel in his paws was running through the crowd.

“We have to help!” Lily said and Yin started the chase. Frostfur roared as he began to charge toward the thief. The crowds began to disperse to let the tiger through. A wall of earth suddenly erupted from the ground. The thief was unable to react in time and crashed into it.

“Woah, nice one Lily!” Yin praised as Frostfur stopped near the fallen over bear.

“I didn’t do that.” Lily replied in a low voice.

“Then who else would have done that? You’re the only shaman in this territory as far as I know.” Without responding, Lily approached the thief and grabbed the satchel.

“Oh thank you stranger!” a female said as she approached Lily for her satchel. “You are so kind.”

“It was no trouble. Now this wall needs to stop blocking the road.” Lily raised her paws and in a downward motion, she pushed the wall back into the ground. With her identity revealed from her action, her name was whispered from the surrounding crowd.

“Princess? Shouldn’t you be in the temple?”

“She is so helpful! A true protector to us!”

“I didn’t even recognize her through that outfit.”

“Well, so much for subtly.” Yin approached Lily and helped pull her back onto Frostfur.

“I couldn’t just leave it there, though I still have no idea who summoned the wall.”

“Princess! Please you and Yin must have a drink and lunch at my tavern!”

the tavern keeper said. Yin turned to Lily with pleading eyes.

“Of course. It would be rude of us to not accept such a generous offer.” She said.

“Yes! Anything to keep us out of that temple!” Yin cheered.

Inside, eyes kept glancing at Lily as her citizens were happy to see her out in the town with them. Yin was happily stuffing her face with the food that was brought to the table for them as well as the drinks while Lily’s eyes were fixed on a large brown-furred male who was sitting with several others. She was getting a strange familiar feeling about him, but she could not recognize him. Yin stared at her for a moment before turning to see what she was staring at. “What are you looking at?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Lily replied.

“Come on, you’re clearly staring at something.” Yin said as she turned again. Suddenly the male glanced at Lily, causing her to look down at her plate. “Is everything ok? Do I need to beat someone up? That’s what I’m here for after all.”

“Don’t worry, everything is fine. We should probably head back soon though. We never did tell anyone that we were leaving the temple for a while.”

“Yeah, I really don’t feel like dealing with the advisor after she sends out search parties for us.” Yin said and they left the tavern.

“Hey! Wait!” a voice called to them before Lily could get on Frostfur’s back. The male Lily had stared at approached her with her scarf in his paw. “You left this on the back of your chair.”

“My scarf! Thank you, I really appreciate you getting it back to me.” Lily said.

“If I hadn’t seen you stop that thief, I wouldn’t think you were that brave. I

didn't think I'd meet another shaman here either." He said.

"That rock wall...that was you wasn't it?" Lily asked.

"Sorry you had to clean that up for me. I didn't want others to see since I don't like being in the spotlight, especially since it's not every day that some get to see a shaman in action. Do you live in this town?"

"I do, though I've never seen you before."

"I've only recently arrived to this town. I'm a traveler. I'll be staying here for a while if you'd like to meet up again sometime. Name's Earthfur by the way."

"Nice to meet you Earthfur. My name is Lily. I'll keep your offer in mind." She said and climbed onto the tiger. Earthfur went back into the tavern, but Yin kept Frostfur still as she looked over her shoulder. "What?"

"So *that's* what you were staring at in there." Yin teased.

"I just sensed something is all! I had a feeling that he was close to the spirits, but I wasn't sure."

"Oh is that all? Because I'm sensing something else. You think he's cute."

"I've just never met another shaman."

"You already have something in common." Yin continued to tease.

"Keep it up and I'll tell Myra who ate all her favorite cookies this morning."

"How do you know for sure that it was me?"

"Who else would go through the trouble of finding the jar that she hides in the kitchen and steal every single cookie?"

"Putting the jar on the highest shelf in the kitchen isn't hiding it." Yin said as they started toward the temple.

When they had a free night, Lily snuck out of the temple with Yin and they approached the inn from the side to stay hidden. Yin stayed back near the trees to keep watch and be there in case Lily needed her for anything. Knowing he was a shaman, Lily was able to sense his energy and approached a window on the ground floor. She gently tapped on the glass with her fist. Soon the curtains parted and Earthfur opened his window.

“Lily? You could have come through the front door you know.” He greeted.

“Oh, well, I just kind of knew you were in this room.” she started.

“No, it’s alright. I know why you couldn’t come through the front door.” He said and stood to the side to allow her to climb inside. “So, are you really the princess?”

“You found that out quickly.”

“I asked around about the girl named Lily. I heard great things about you and then one of them actually mentioned that you’re the princess.”

“I see. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“I don’t care that you didn’t tell me that day, but I do wonder why you bothered to come and see me then.” His expression showed deep confusion. “If you really are of royal blood, then I should tell you that I’m very much not. I’m just a traveler.”

“I don’t care *what* you are but *who*. I’ve never met another shaman before. My best friend is a rogue.”

“It’s just that, well, I really liked you that day, but I can’t even take you out on a date.”

“If the spirits meant for us to meet, then it would be bad for both of us to ignore that. We may never meet another shaman again.”

“I know. I had a feeling that day that we were meant to meet. For a royal to

be with a normal blood like me though... I've never even heard of such a thing."

"Who says others have to know? It seems strange that I would not be able to choose to be with a mate that I actually care for, regardless of if he had royal blood or not."

"You would risk breaking a pure royal bloodline?" Earthfur softly laughed at her rebelliousness.

"Even I don't know how *pure* my blood is. I wouldn't be surprised if one or more of my ancestors already broke the purity of the royal blood, nor would I look down on them for it." Earthfur scratched his neck as he thought. "If you want, I can leave. I'm sorry..."

"No, it's not that. It's just, how much would your rule be affected? You'd never be able to choose another mate. After denying enough princes, wouldn't your advisors become suspicious? It seems too risky."

"Well, if you're planning on staying here for a while, then we will at least have time to think about it."

"I'm in no rush to leave." Earthfur smiled.

Every night after that one, Yin snuck Lily out and brought her to the side of the inn where she and Earthfur would spend time together. At first they were just talking, but Yin knew that they still liked each other a lot, and after a while they began to show it. One night after climbing onto Frostfur's back, Yin turned and sniffed Lily, whose scent was strongly mixed with Earthfur's.

"You need a bath." Yin said.

"R-really? It's that strong...?"

"Well, yeah. What did you expect?" Yin laughed. Back inside the temple, Yin stood outside the door to the bathroom in Lily's room. "So..."

"Yes?" Lily answered from her bath.

“It’s official then, huh? You two are mates?” she heard Lily giggle before she answered.

“I guess it is then.” Lily walked through the door in her nightgown. “I just have no idea how I’ll present this to the advisor.”

“I guess it doesn’t really matter. You have a mate and there’s nothing she can do about that. We’ll think of something when we need to.”

Weeks passed and Lily still saw Earthfur even while a prince from another territory was visiting to try to have her be his mate. Lily tried to not be rude to him, being very vocal about his hatred for the cold weather made being polite back to him difficult. Both Yin and Lily were relieved when his visit finally came to an end.

One day, Yin sat at the desk in Lily’s room mixing ingredients into a flask. “Are you almost done in there?” she called out.

“Sorry. I’m just so nervous!” Lily answered from the bathroom.

“The sooner you get out here, the sooner we get the results. Unless you need to wait a while.”

“No, I’ll come out. Just give me another moment.” After a few more moments, Lily finally returned to her room and handed Yin another flask which she quickly poured into the larger one and began to mix the contents while Lily lay on her bed. “I’m really nervous.”

“What result are you hoping for then?”

“I don’t know. Just let me know when it’s done, and then I’ll let you know how I feel.” Lily was surprised when she heard the mixing stop and Yin did not say anything. “Is it done? Do you know?”

“Yeah, it’s done. Congratulations.”

“You mean...?”

“You’re pregnant. So, how do you feel now?” she walked up to the side of the bed.

“I’m pregnant...I’m really having a cub!” a smile formed on Lily’s face. “I should tell Earthfur!”

“Woah slow down. We’ll talk to him later, but for now we have to focus on keeping this a secret.” Lily struggled to stay patient for nightfall, but Yin was happy to see her friend in such a good mood. When they finally had a chance, they rushed to the inn where Lily cheerfully shared the news with him.

“So the time has arrived then.” Earthfur said.

“I know! I was really nervous at first, but now I’m just so happy!”

“Lily, my love, I must leave for a while.” Earthfur said in a solemn tone, causing Lily’s happy expression to drain into sadness.

“Leave? When will you be back?”

“Not for a long time. If anyone were to find out that we’re having a cub together, it would be bad for all three of us.” He said. “My home is in the last of the Snowpeak Mountains where they meet with the green forest. You know where that is?”

“Yes I do, but I’d rather you be here with me.” She said with deep sadness in her face.

“I know, but it’s only until the cub is born. At that point they have to accept the fact, and if they don’t, I can at least take the cub while we work something out. If they found out now, they would be so enraged that they’ll just wait until the cub is born to banish them or worse.”

“You’re right. When I can, I will send for you to return here.”

“I wish you the best of luck while I’m gone, and don’t forget: we’re always connected through the spirits. If you send a spirit, I know they’ll find me for

sure. Those mountains are dangerous and I'd rather you not try to travel out there." He finished and he kissed her before preparing to pack his belongings. Lily knew she had to return to the temple and explained everything to Yin on their way back. Yin had Frostfur walk at a slow pace. She looked up at the bright stars in the dark sky that were only visible through holes in the layer of clouds. She took a deep breath as a gentle cold wind blew into them. She felt Lily press her muzzle against her back. After a moment she heard sniffing.

"You'll see him again. Maybe when the time comes, things won't be as complicated as we think." Yin said in a gentle voice, but Lily did not reply as she continued to cry. She stopped Frostfur and tried to think of something else to say to comfort her friend. "Just think of all the things you don't have to worry about now. You have a fantastic mate *and* he's a shaman! You're lucky you know. If your cub ends up being a shaman, that'll be another huge accomplishment!"

"Yin, promise me something. Promise that you'll never leave. You'll always be by my side, right?" Lily asked in a pleading tone. She leaned back while Yin managed to turn around so she faced her. Before she spoke, Yin wrapped her arms around her and held her in a tight hug.

"I have no intentions of leaving. Why would I want to? I have the best and most important job in the world."

"Being my bodyguard?" Lily questioned in disbelief.

"That too, but I'm talking about my *other* best and most important job in the world." Confused and curious, Lily leaned away from Yin. Her calmed breathing and crying being reduced to an occasional tear running down her cheeks made Yin realize that her distraction was working. "I'm your best friend and that's a lot of work. I have to protect you, be there for you at all times, sneak you out of the temple and back inside, and most importantly I have to keep you smiling as often as possible."

"We could try to reduce the number of responsibilities you carry." Lily

smiled, knowing that Yin was planning something.

“I love all my jobs! I get the best salary ever.”

“You don’t get paid.” Lily softly giggled. “Your position allows you to use of the temple’s treasure.”

“But I just got paid right now.” Yin smiled. Lily stared at her for a moment with a serious expression, trying to figure out Yin’s challenge. Her mouth opened slightly as if to speak but suddenly closed and formed a smile as she grew more interested in the game.

“I’m getting paid again.” Yin hinted.

“My smile?” Lily seemed even more confused.

“Or laugh, both are equally as good.”

“A simple smile or laugh is enough to make it worth tending to all your daily chores?”

“You have a very pretty smile, but your laughs are the best because you have so many different ones. It’s fun to see which one I get.”

“How many laughs could one have?”

“Well, there’s your giggle. I get that a lot, but with a little push I can get you to actually laugh. There’s your trying to not giggle, which is one of my favorites, which you do usually when I’m setting up a prank for Myra. Of course there are times when you just burst out in laughter which is always awesome too. There are more, but the point is, I can’t leave because who else will make sure you keep using all those laughs?”

“What would I do without you?” Lily smiled and hugged Yin.

Yin grew especially protective over Lily over the next few months. She knew that eventually Lily would not be able to hide her pregnancy and the advisor would notice and surely become suspicious. She and Lily planned to tell

her that the cub belonged to the last prince to visit and that they did not find out until he left and they would send a letter to him in time, but they did not want to rush him back to the mountains after he returned to his home which he so badly missed. Yin could tell that Myra did not believe the story, but she still had no idea who Lily had chosen for a mate. Yin let Myra's curiosity keep her busy while she kept her guard up. When the time had come, Yin stood right beside Lily during the birth of her cub, and after a while, a new princess was born.

"She's beautiful." Lily said as she held the tiny cub in her arms.

"Do you know what you want to call her?" Yin asked.

"I think I'll name her...Saraynea."

"Saraynea, huh?" Yin looked down at the cub who stared back with curious blue eyes.

"I think she likes you." Lily smiled and handed the cub to Yin without warning. Yin carefully held her in her arms.

"Uh, hi there." She said to the cub who tilted her head and smiled in response, forcing Yin to smile back. "Great Spirits, she's too cute!" She passed Saraynea back to her mother who affectionately nuzzled her.

Even when Lily was around, Yin always stayed close to the cub. The advisor congratulated Lily and offered to help in any way she could, but Yin grew suspicious that she was being overly interested, which caused Yin to become extremely protective over Saraynea. She leaned against the corner across from where the crib was in Lily's room. The bookshelf next to her provided some cover which was instinctive for her being a rogue. Lily was out of the room, leaving her to guard the cub when she heard footsteps enter the room. Yin refrained from growling at the sight of Myra as she leaned over the crib.

"If only you could tell me who your father is." she said. Yin stayed quiet

and hidden to find out what the advisor was thinking. “I do know that you’re not the cub of the prince from the red mountain though, as he specifically expressed how disappointed he was that Lily refused him before leaving, but of course she won’t tell me the truth. What concerns me is that you may not be a pure-blood. Now that makes things both concerning and interesting.” She put her paw on the dagger at her belt.

“Are you done?” Yin growled. Myra looked up with a surprised expression which she quickly hid with a smile.

“I was wondering why she would have been left alone like this. You really need to watch her from that dark corner?” Myra asked.

“You really need to keep hold of your dagger while you look down at her?”

“Ah, Yin, will you ever learn to trust me? We’ve known each other for a long time and yet we’ve never tried to sit down and work things out between us.”

“Not interested. I can see right through your lies.” Yin glared at Myra.

“Sometimes I wonder, Yin, if you’re really as strong as you try to appear.”

“Want to put that thought to a test?” Yin enjoyed the idea of dueling with the advisor, but she laughed in response. “What’s so funny?”

“I don’t mean physically, Yin. I have a feeling that you gained this tough shell when you were brought into the temple. Or is it because you may know my true intentions? Does that make you feel like you have a lot of power? Just remember that I still have more rule than Lily does even though she’s older now. Until she marries a prince, she can’t have more control than I do.” She looked back at the cub and smiled. “Perhaps this cub isn’t as much trouble as I thought. Lily *can’t* marry a prince now, right?” Yin pulled back her lips to a snarl. “Oh stop looking at me like that. Draw either of your blades at me, and its immediate execution for you. I’m sure I can bend a few rules to avoid needing Lily’s

consent.” She finished and finally left the room.

When Lily returned, she entered her room to see Yin sitting on the edge of the bed with her back to the door. Lily slowly approached her and when she was close enough, she saw that Yin was holding Saraynea in her arms as she licked the small cub’s ear. Lily stood right behind her for a moment, expecting her to notice, but she appeared to be in a trance as she tended to Saraynea. “Good to see you two are getting along so nicely.” Lily said and Yin suddenly stopped and turned with a surprised look on her face.

“I didn’t even hear you come in!” she paused. “How long were you standing there?” she asked causing Lily to laugh.

“Does how long really matter?”

“I guess not.” Yin replied with flattened ears as she handed Saraynea to Lily who immediately continued to tenderly groom her cub’s ears and face.

“I appreciate you looking after her so much. You’re actually quite the sitter when needed.” Lily held Saraynea against her shoulder so the cub could nuzzle into her fur.

“Helping out is what I’m here for. Besides, I’m your bodyguard, so it’s my job to protect you and her as well anyway.” Lily replied by giving a quick lick to Yin’s ear.

Lily and Yin continued to rest in the room when the advisor suddenly rushed into the room. “Princess! There’s trouble!”

“What is it?” Lily asked.

“I received reports of a gang fight that’s happening in town! I need you meet with the general to discuss what should be done and how the gang members should be punished.” Myra explained.

“Shouldn’t you be doing that now instead of coming here?” Yin asked.

“I already spoke with him. He needs the opinion of the princess now to finalize the orders. Meanwhile, I’d like you to head down there and try to separate the fight or guide the innocents to safety, whatever you can do to help.”

“Why have I not received word of gang activity until now?” Lily asked.

“They simply weren’t a danger until now. There was no reason to inform you.” Myra replied.

“Why don’t you go and try to guide the innocents away? Why would you need a higher ranking guard like myself?” Yin argued.

“Because unlike you I have no fighting skills! I’ll stay here with the cub while you’re gone.” Myra was barely able to take a single step toward the crib before Yin stood in front of her.

“Over my dead body!” Yin growled.

“Yin, we should act quickly if we’re needed. Frostfur is the fastest tiger in the dens. You’ll be able to get there quickly.” Yin suddenly struggled with the worst conflict she could imagine. She could not argue with her friend’s request, but she hated the thought of leaving Saraynea with the most untrustworthy member of the temple. “I must make my way to the High Guard and check in with his reports.” Lily left the room. Yin turned and glared at the advisor before rushing to catch up with Lily who was already nearing the entrance of the temple.

“You know this doesn’t make sense!” Yin warned.

“Trust me, Yin, I believe you, but when fights like this break out, even her reputation is damaged for not noticing.”

“I’ll be back here as soon as I can.” Yin said and she brought her fingers to her lips and whistled, summoning Frostfur to her so she could jump onto his back. Lily arrived at the quarters of the High Guard and quickly opened the door.

“Princess! Are you alright? Is there trouble?” he got up from his table and approached her. Lily immediately knew that he wasn’t expecting her.

“Dammit!” Yin growled as she rode back toward the temple. “As fast as you can Frostfur! We have to get back to Saraynea before anything happens to her! I knew I should’ve stayed with her!” with one of her worst fears coming true, Yin could not hold back the tears that rushed to her eyes. Before he had fully stopped at the steps of the temple, Yin jumped off her tiger’s back and ran to Lily’s room. Upon entering, she saw Lily standing in front of the crib. “Lily?” she said, praying to the spirits that everything was ok. Lily turned with tears rushing down her cheeks. Without delay, Yin ran up to the crib and pulled out the blanket that was used to keep Saraynea warm and stood on the window frame and whistled. “I’ll find her! I promise!” Frostfur roared to alert that he was near and Yin leaped from the window to a tree to soften her landing to Frostfur’s back. She had him sniff the blanket before charging off in search of the kidnapped cub.

Advisor Myra rode her own tiger along the path in the thickening forest to a building that was placed away from the town. In one of her arms she held the small cub who had been crying the whole time. “Enough! Your irritating screaming will only get you killed! I’d do it myself but that rogue will assume I did it anyway...I’m better off not even risking giving her a chance at finding any evidence that I killed you. I can’t let a half-breed live in the temple though.” Myra stopped her tiger and walked up to the door of her destination. A young female opened the door.

“Hello there! How can I help you?” she greeted.

“I’m afraid I have a cub that was unwanted by her family. I thought it would be better to bring her here than to have her suffer in a place where she won’t be cared for.”

“Poor thing!” the female took Saraynea from Myra and tried to calm her

crying. “We work hard to help all of our orphans find the best homes for them.

“Actually, I do have a request for you. There is a chance that other members of her family will take her in, but they live in a town far away from here. Would you be able to transport her?” Myra asked.

“It depends. The furthest partner we can transfer her to is in SmallWood.”

“That’s it! That’s where she her family should be.” Myra knew how far the small remote town named SmallWood was. It was surrounded by a thick and dangerous forest where most travelers did not dare to walk.

“In the town of SmallWood...?” the female asked with concern. “Are you sure? I’d hate to send her there if no one is expecting her. Their adoption rates are not as high. In fact, it’s quite crowded there.”

“Don’t worry. I already sent a letter to her family so they’ll know that she’s on her way. They’re a nice group and I know they’ll take her in.”

“That’s good. I hate the thought of her being stuck in that orphanage there for too long. We’ll make sure she gets there safely.” The female finished and she went inside. Myra got back on her tiger, satisfied that that Saraynea was being sent to a faraway town with close to no chance of ever returning.

Lily visited her own gold-fur tiger in the dens in hope of being able to be comforted by her while Yin was gone. She suddenly noticed the only white tiger approaching her. “Frostfur? If you’re here, then where is Yin?” she asked. Frostfur slowly led her to the temple garden where Yin was sitting at the edge of the pond with her face buried in her knees. Lily quietly sat down beside her as Frostfur pressed his head into Yin.

“She did this! I know it.” Yin said before lifting her head. “I’ll kill her! I’ll make sure she pays for this!”

“I have a feeling too, but without proof, there is nothing even I can do.”

“I’m so sorry Lily. I should have stayed with her! My only job was to protect you both and I failed!”

“I failed her too and I’m her mother. I was so concerned with making sure that Myra believed that I trusted her. I never thought she would go this far. When the time is right, she will get what she deserves for this. Until then, we pray that the spirits will keep Saraynea safe.” Lily’s voice cracked as she finished. Yin glanced at her and saw that she was quickly breaking down and started crying. Lily’s tiger pressed her head against her, allowing Lily to cry into her fur. “Please Spirits! I don’t know if she possesses the abilities of a shaman, but please watch over her. Guide her home.” She begged.

Myra was organizing the many scrolls in her personal scroll room which was located in the darker, cooler, and much quieter basement of the temple. She paused and started to look over her shoulder, but before she could see who it was, she was grabbed and slammed against one of the shelves. Yin glared into her eyes as she held her dagger up.

“You wouldn’t try to kill me. You’ll be executed as soon as anyone suspects you.” Myra said with confidence. She was surprised when Yin pulled her arm back. Myra closed her eyes and opened them again to see that Yin’s blade had been sunk into the wood right next to her face.

“Where is she?” Yin growled with tears in her eyes. “What did you do with Saraynea!?” Myra laughed in response and swatted at Yin’s arm to free herself from the grip.

“You’ll never find her.” She answered in a satisfied tone that disgusted Yin since she admitted to kidnapping the daughter of the princess.

“But she’s still alive?” Yin asked.

“Come on now, Yin, I’m not *that* low. But, it doesn’t matter whether or not she lives.”

“You’re such a coward! If you want to mess with someone, let it be me!” Yin growled.

“I couldn’t mess with you even if I wanted to. You’re the only one who’s open about not trusting me. You’re just a lucky rogue who was allowed to live in the temple because Lily saw you as a friend. Even if you managed to find some clue to work against me, no one will believe you.” Myra said. Knowing that she was right, Yin pressed her forehead against the cabinet. “Don’t beat yourself up too much.” Myra stood behind Yin and slowly reached for the dagger at her own belt. “It’s not like there was anything you could do. There is nothing you’ll ever be able to do to stop me.” Myra raised her blade, but before she could strike, Yin turned and landed a powerful punch to the advisor’s face, sending her to the cold hard ground while her blade clanged against the stone floor. “You’re lucky I won’t tell the guards about this.” She looked up and saw Yin pull her dagger from the cabinet and approach her with both of her blades ready. “You don’t want to do this.” Myra warned and she reached into her robe and pulled out a vial containing a dark purple liquid.

“You’re going to try to poison me?” Yin laughed.

“No, not you. I know you’d never fall for such a trick from me. All I have to do is place a few drops of this in a cup of tea and hand it to Lily while your back is turned.” Yin took a step back. “That’s better.” Myra stood up. “I’ll leave the princess alone...for now. I hope one day that we might have a real fight, but until then, keep your distance and the princess lives. I’m curious to see if you can handle it.”

“When that battle comes, you will lay on the floor broken and defeated while I stand over you with my blades that will be coated with your blood.” Yin promised. Myra chuckled and left the room.

Present

Part 3

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 too 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.

Part 4

“When you left...” Lily started her story in a sad tone. “I did my best to keep our cub a secret. I never called you back here because I was ashamed that I was unable to protect her.”

“Taken? If there was trouble, I could have helped!” Earthfur said.

“How could I face you and tell you that I failed? I let my guard down during one crucial moment.” Lily placed a paw to her face.

“I’m confused...” Ayumei said. “So we knew that Earthfur fell in love with a princess - which is you - but, how would we know for sure that Sara is your daughter?”

“I kept my cub wrapped in this blanket all the time. When I found the empty crib, this blanket was used to help Frostfur search for her. It was never used for anything else. The only scent it carries is my daughter’s.” Lily explained.

“It’s so small...” Achamaru said in a low voice.

“She was taken from me when she was so young. I wasn’t even sure if she was alive.” Lily said.

“So, if Sara is your daughter, then doesn’t that make her...?” Mynh started.

“The princess of this temple and the FrostPeak Mountains Territory.” Lily confirmed.

“Woah, so first we get arrested by guards and now we find out that our friend is a princess!” Korramaru said.

“Oh dear, that’s right.” Lily sighed. “I’m so sorry about that. I’ll make sure all the guards know to not bother you like that again.”

“I still can’t get over that Earthfur is your dad.” Achamaru said.

“Me too.” Earthfur replied.

“This is a lot to get used to.” Huo added.

“This is a big deal to us too.” Yin said. “We all have to get adjusted. The entire territory as well.”

“We don’t need to worry about that quite yet.” Lily said. “News of my cub never left this temple. No one in the town or other territories know and we’ll keep it that way for the time being.”

“So we have to keep this a secret?” Longwei asked.

“Is there trouble we should keep alert for?” Shadestep added.

“I don’t want to burden any of you.” Lily started. “I want your stay to be as comfortable as possible. To start, I will have a room prepared for the females and one for the males so you may rest in the temple.”

“That’s overly generous of you.” Earthfur said.

“You’re all special guests here. I’m going to make sure you feel that way.” Lily replied. “For now, let’s keep things quiet while I sort everything out.”

“Are you sure you don’t need any help?” Earthfur asked.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of everything. It’s simply a matter of planning how to say that I have a mate and that our young princess has returned.” Lily smiled at Saraynea, who turned away. Lily’s expression saddened and her ears flattened at her daughter’s rejection. “I’m sure you’re all tired from your travel. Please, take some time to rest. If you need anything, just ask the temple workers and they’ll take care of you.” When she finished, everyone left the room, leaving only Lily and Yin.

“You’re sure about this?” Yin said quietly.

“What other option do we have? Not only has Earthfur finally returned, but the spirits granted me a second chance to be with my daughter. If Frostfur matched the scent, then it has to be her. The spirits protected her and brought her home.” Lily tightly gripped the blanket in her paws. “I won’t mess this up. I have a chance to have my family back and I will not take it lightly.”

“Whatever you need, I’m here for you.”

“You always have been, my friend.” Lily smiled.

Saraynea continuously tossed and rolled over in her bed until she rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling for a few moments. She heard the gentle breathing of the rest of her friends as they slept, meanwhile she could not feel more awake. In the bed beside her, Feleine appeared to be in a deep sleep.

“Feleine?” Saraynea whispered. “Feleine.” She said a little louder. Not wanting to wake any of others, she stood up and walked to the side of Feleine’s bed. “Hey.” She whispered, but her friend proved difficult to wake up. She leaned down and gave a few licks to her ear until she half opened her eyes.

“Hey...” Feleine said in a quiet voice.

“Can I talk to you?”

“Sure.” Feleine shuffled back to give Saraynea enough room to lay next to her.

“I can’t sleep.” Saraynea said and stared into Feleine’s tired blue eyes for a moment. Realizing that she did not know what to say next, she averted her eyes, feeling bad about waking her up.

“Crazy day, huh?” Feleine said softly.

“Yeah.” Saraynea replied, still looking away. After a moment of silence, she looked back at Feleine when she heard her yawn, her eyes closing again at the end. “I just don’t understand.” Saraynea sighed.

“Hm?”

“I’m supposed to believe that we walk into this town and the princess claims that I might be her daughter? And Earthfur is my dad?”

“And what if it’s true?” Feleine replied with her eyes still closed.

“But, me being a princess? That’s a huge deal.”

“It’s a big change for all of us, but we’ll get through it together.”

“You’ll still be my best friend right?” Saraynea asked. Feleine opened her eyes again.

“We’ll always be best friends. Nothing in the entire world could change that.” She replied and gave a quick lick to Saraynea’s snout, forcing her to smile. “Now, try to get some rest. I’m sure you’re just as tired as the rest of us.”

“Thanks, Feleine.” Saraynea gave several licks to Feleine’s ear before returning to her bed and trying to sleep.

“Good morning everyone.” Lily happily greeted as the team approached. Myra stood next to her with a far less enthusiastic expression about seeing them again. Lily noticed Saraynea’s uncomfortable stance and reached out for her shoulder, but before she could even touch her, sparks of electricity formed and reached back. Lily pulled her paw away while Saraynea turned to her with a nervous expression.

“Are you ok?” Feleine asked to Saraynea.

“Is *she* ok? She just shocked our princess!” Advisor Myra growled, but Lily raised her paw. “But, Princess! I told you they were dangerous and now she directly tried to hurt you!”

“That was not on purpose.” Lily said and she slowly reached out with her paw again. When the sparks danced around her paw and Saraynea’s shoulder, she did not retreat. “You’re a shaman.” She smiled.

“Doesn’t that hurt?” Ayumei asked.

“Not at all. I’m a shaman too. I can handle a weak shock of electricity.” Lily replied before focusing on Saraynea again. “You’re nervous.” She said quietly. “Please don’t be. Perhaps a hot bath will help you to relax?” she offered.

“A hot bath?” Myra questioned. “This is a sacred temple and you want to provide these strangers with a bath?”

“The baths in the temple are large enough for them. We could set up another bath for the males as well of course.”

“Can my dragon get a bath too?” Korramaru asked. Everyone turned to her with surprise from her request.

“You have a dragon?” Lily asked.

“Yeah, I had him stay outside the town so he wouldn’t scare anyone.”

“You expect us to wash your dragon...” Myra sighed.

“I’ve never seen a real dragon before.” Lily interrupted with excitement.

“Princess, I don’t think this is a very good idea.” Myra said.

“May I see him?” Lily asked. After Korramaru nodded, Lily brought everyone just outside the temple, where Korramaru let out a sharp whistle. After a short moment, a large shadow appeared and Stormfang gently landed near them. “Oh wow! What a gorgeous creature.” Lily said as she placed her paw against his scales.

“This is absurd!” Myra shrieked. “Dragons are vicious and destructive beasts! We shouldn’t allow it so close to the temple!”

“Hey, Stormfang is a great dragon!” Korramaru snapped back. Frostfur cautiously approached Stormfang, who stared back with curiosity. Everyone watched in silence as the two creatures approached each other, Frostfur being much more careful in the presence of the large dragon. Stormfang leaned

forward and sniffed the tiger. As they became acquainted, they both relaxed and suddenly did not mind each other's presence, as if they had known each other since they were a hatchling and cub.

"If Frostfur doesn't mind, then I'm ok with the dragon too." Yin said.

"He seems quite gentle. If he doesn't mind the company of more tigers, he should fit in the dens just fine." Lily said as she continued to scratch his mane. "That way he doesn't have to stay outside the town walls."

"You're going to leave this beast with the tigers!?" Myra growled. With Stormfang's large body blocking their view of each other, Lily let out a sigh in response to Myra's statement. A smile formed on her face and she gently pressed down on Stormfang's neck so he would lower himself, allowing her to look at the advisor.

"Since you're so concerned, you can oversee his bath and make sure nothing goes wrong." Lily said with a smile. Myra was clearly surprised.

"Me!? But..." Myra started.

"Oh, and I'm sure he's hungry too since he spent last night outside the town." Lily added.

"We probably don't have enough meat to keep a dragon fed. The health of the tigers is more important." Myra argued.

"Just mix in some grasses and he'll be fine." Korramaru said.

"Grass? It eats grass?" Myra questioned with doubt.

"Of course he eats grass. He's a dragon." Korramaru glared back at Myra.

"We'll give them a tour in the meantime." Lily said. Myra sighed before replying.

"I'll be in the tiger dens if anyone needs me." Myra approached Stormfang and reached for his reigns. "You too." She said and grabbed Frostfur's reigns in

her other paw. The large tiger began to trot toward the dens, pulling Myra along behind her. “This tiger is poorly trained!” she growled before she disappeared around a corner of the temple toward the dens.

“That was a pretty awesome way to get rid of the advisor.” Yin praised with a laugh.

“That should keep her busy and out of our fur for a while.” Lily sighed with relief. “I feel much better being able to introduce you all to the temple without her help. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, Advisor Myra can be rather...”

“Rude?” Korramaru said.

“Cold?” Ayumei added.

“Judgmental.” Saraynea said in a lower voice.

“Eh, stiff.” Lily said as she tried to lighten the mood. “Now, let’s get you all to the temple’s bathroom.”

The patrolling guards paused to bow to Lily before continuing their walk down the halls.

“Wow! This temple is so pretty!” Ayumei cheered.

“The guards sure look tough though.” Huo said, noticing the heavy armor and powerful glaives the guards carried.

“We focus on training powerful warriors to defend the territory. The resources we harvest from the mountains provide strong materials for weapon and armor crafting. They make for great trade offers to our allies in return for medicines and other goods that are hard to produce in these mountains.” Lily explained.

“I imagine it would be hard to grow plants in the snowy territory.” Mynh said.

“This temple was built up here because the mountain itself provides

dependable protection from invasions. The town offers a place for travelers to rest and trade with us if they approach from the forest. There's a path that leads out of this town and down the mountain behind the temple, where our second town and farms are located." Lily continued.

"This is an interesting territory. Building a temple way up here knowing that you'd still need to protect and have easy access to the plains behind the mountain seems like strange decision to make." Kheiryn said.

"Well, they did it and the system seems to be working." Feleine replied.

"If your second town exists in the shadow behind this mountain, how would you know if you're being attacked from the back?" Shadestep asked.

"That valley is well protected by other mountains with far worse snow storms and avalanches than you would find on this side. It's actually easier to access it from the roads that already exist here, and the only way down there is along a single path." Lily explained.

"So it would be easier to get there by first invading this town, which would be tempting anyway since this is where the temple itself is located, yet this town specializes in weaponry and fighting. Looks like your ancestors knew exactly what they were doing." Kheiryn said.

"Since when are you so into history?" Korramaru asked.

"I did a lot of reading as a cub. It's how I discovered books on alchemy in the first place." Kheiryn said.

"Well, you are correct," Lily smiled, "When I was young, I didn't understand the logic of using the temple to bait enemies into the first town either, but I later realized that if this town were to fall, the citizens in the valley would have nowhere to go. Their only options would be the path that connects them to this town or trying to escape through the stormy mountains." Lily continued.

"Isn't it scary knowing that your temple is located in the town that would be

attacked first?” Ayumei asked.

“It’s been many years since anyone has tried to invade this territory. My ancestors protected it well during vicious wars. Its battle history is intimidating enough to make enemies have second thoughts about trying to claim it. You could learn just about anything you’d like about this territory from the books in the library.” Lily said.

“Sadly, external troubles are the least of our worries. It’s the problems on the inside that have been a main focus for years.” Yin said.

“Like bandits.” Mynh said.

“I’m afraid so, but these are not problems that you need to worry about. Besides, your day of relaxation is about to begin.” Lily said as they approached two females who bowed at the sight of their princess. “Snowflurry and Snowflower will be taking care of all your needs.”

“It’s an honor to be a part of your welcoming home, Princess Saraynea.” Snowflurry greeted.

“We’re blessed to have you back in the territory.” Snowflower added. Saraynea’s ears flattened with discomfort. She felt a paw gently rest on her shoulder.

“Only the members of the temple know who you are. If you ever need anything, you may ask these sisters and they will take care of you. You can always come to Yin or myself as well.” Lily said with a comforting smile.

“If you need me, I’ll probably be outside. I kind of really want to see how Myra is dealing with that dragon.” Yin smirked.

“You go ahead. I finally got her out of my fur, so I’m going to do my best to avoid her for as long as possible.” Lily replied. Yin nodded before walking away.

“You two seem close.” Saraynea said to Lily.

“Yin isn’t just my top body guard. She’s been my best friend since we were cubs. I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t have her around.” Lily said.

“Sounds like she’s a great friend. I’m glad to know exactly what it’s like to have that kind of friend around.” Saraynea turned toward Feleine, who like the others were listening to Korramaru telling a story about the duels she had while traveling. Snowflurry and Snowflower listened with wide, impressed eyes.

“She leaves me to deal with the dragon!” Myra grumbled as she watched several of the den keepers rub suds along Stormfang’s body with brooms. The dragon lay on his side with his eyes closed. Beside him, Frostfur sat alert as he glanced around at the dens before him. A keeper was walking up to clusters of tigers, throwing down meat for them. Any tigers that sat alone let out a small cry that made sure that a meal was tossed to them as well before the keeper walked away to tend to another area of the dens.

Stormfang opened his eyes to the sound of Frostfur letting out a deep growl. He leaned up and tried to see what was causing Frostfur’s tension. A large red tiger approached with his gaze set on the white tiger’s meal. They growled and prepared to fight each other.

“Not again.” one of the keepers who was washing Stormfang sighed.

“Those two always go at it.” another added.

“Yin’s tiger is the only one brave enough to pick a fight with Bloodclaw.” Another said.

“He’s not brave. He’s stupid.” Myra growled. “Bloodclaw is the alpha tiger of the dens. Just like Yin, her tiger has no respect for authority.” She finished in an angry tone. Frostfur and Bloodclaw snarled at each other for a moment, catching the attention of the other tigers that turned to observe what was about to unfold. The two tigers lunged for each other, their aggressive fight kicking up a cloud of dust. Suddenly, Bloodclaw sprinted away to other side of the dens, but

Frostfur did not chase him. He reached down for the meat and began to eat. Myra scowled before walking toward where Bloodclaw ran.

In a dark remote den, Bloodclaw was laying on a large flat rock licking a fresh gash on his shoulder. He turned and snarled when Myra stood in the entrance of the den.

“I know. Trust me, I understand how badly you want to put Frostfur in his place. When the time comes, you’ll be able to shred him to pieces.” Myra said. Bloodclaw let out a long low growl in response. “No, not yet. I know you’re strong enough to get the job done, but even just one witness to you killing Yin’s tiger will only put a bigger target on my back. You have to be just as careful around Frostfur as I have to be around Yin.” Myra continued, but Bloodclaw only sighed back. “Soon Bloodclaw. I promise. Perhaps, in the very near future, since a perfect little distraction has arrived in town. It seems that Lily’s daughter has returned.” She said, causing Bloodclaw to tilt his head. “Yes, that cub we brought to the orphanage in the forest.” She confirmed and Bloodclaw let out a quick cry. “I don’t know how! Lily said it was the spirits but I wouldn’t know! I’m not a shaman!” Myra growled. Bloodclaw sighed and lay on his side. “I’ll let you know when the time for action arrives. Until then, just stay out of trouble.” She finished and walked out of the den.

Saraynea lowered herself so that even her lower jaw was beneath the surface of the warm bath water. Her eyes were closed and she had been mostly silent since entering the bath while the others were engaged in conversation. Feleine slowly moved toward Saraynea, who had been relaxing away from the others.

“Hey.” Feleine greeted. Saraynea opened her eyes and raised her head to smile back. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. Since being here, everything has felt different, but bathing together like this feels much more familiar.” Saraynea replied.

“When you’re finished, Princess Lily has gifted you all with a gorgeous kimono while your other clothes and armor are being washed and repaired.” Snowflurry stood next to a dressing screen that hung six kimonos with unique patterns.

“Oh wow for us?” Ayumei asked.

“They’re beautiful!” Achamaru said.

“I really like the green one!” Feleine smiled.

“I want the red one!” Korramaru announced.

“I knew you’d pick that one.” Kheiryn smiled.

“The black and yellow one would look great with your fur.” Korramaru said to Kheiryn.

“That’s exactly the one I wanted. It’ll just need a minor adjustment for my wings.” Kheiryn said.

“Of course!” Snowflurry said. “I’ll get that fixed for you right away.”

“Excuse me, Princess.” Snowflower walked up to Saraynea. “This one is for you.” She held up a kimono that was bright red with yellow patterns and a thick yellow ribbon at the waist that tied into a large bow on the back. Saraynea stared at it in awe and a smile formed on her face.

Dressed in their new kimonos, the team closely followed as Snowflower led them along the hallways of the temple.

“What are the males up to?” Achamaru asked.

“Snowflurry went to bring them to the dining hall as well.” Snowflower answered. “Lunch is still being prepared, but we wanted you to be able to sit down first.”

“Question.” Korramaru started which caused Snowflower to turn her head

toward her. "Can I get a beer around here?"

"Really Korramaru? We're walking around a temple and you've got beer on your mind?" Achamaru laughed.

"You should talk to Yin sometime. She likes to have a drink every now and then as well. I'm sure she'll gladly have a mug or two with you." Snowflower said. As the group continued to chat, Saraynea glanced down a hallway they were passing and saw Lily and Yin.

"Snowflower?" Saraynea asked to get her attention.

"Yes Princess Saraynea?"

"Would it be ok if I spoke to Princess Lily?"

"You don't need permission to speak to her. You're the young princess after all."

"Oh, right. Still not quite used to that."

"Need anyone to come with you?" Feleine offered.

"I should be fine. I'll meet up with you later." Saraynea said and she made her way down the new hallway. As she approached Lily, her pace slowed and she could feel her nerves starting up again.

"Princess Saraynea." Yin greeted. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Saraynea quickly replied.

"I hope you and your friends like the gifts I offered?" Lily asked.

"Everyone found a favorite." Saraynea smiled, but it quickly faded. "I just wanted to apologize." She said as she looked down at the floor.

"What for?" Lily asked.

"You've been very kind to us and I've barely thanked you enough."

“You’re the young princess. You don’t owe us anything.” Yin said.

“Still getting used to the whole princess thing...” Saraynea admitted in a low voice. Lily stared at her for a moment, trying to think of a way to help her daughter feel better.

“Shall we take a walk outside?” Lily suggested.

“Outside the temple?” Saraynea was surprised at Lily’s comment.

“We’ll still be on the temple grounds of course, so none of the citizens will see us. There’s a path that leads to the temple garden. It’s where I go whenever I’m feeling stressed. Perhaps it will help bring peace to your mind as well.” Lily said and they made their way along the quiet stone path that ran alongside the temple.

“Where does that path lead?” Saraynea paused where a dirt path branched away from the stones.

“The tiger dens. Feel free to visit there if you’d like. When you see your friends again, you should let the owner of the dragon know that he’s down there.” Lily said. “You might see some tigers roaming around here, since they do try to find some peace and quiet just like we do.”

“The tigers come out here by themselves?” Saraynea asked.

“You don’t have to fear them. They’re well-trained.” Lily said. As Saraynea moved her gaze from Lily to the path ahead of her again, Bloodclaw stood before her. She froze as the massive tiger studied her and could not help feeling intimidated by his glare. He only turned away to the sound of a growl which came from Frostfur as he ran up to the dark red tiger and swiped his claws at his head. As the two ran away toward the garden, Saraynea was still frozen from the shock of seeing the unexpected fight between the tigers.

“I’d better go after them and make sure they rip each other apart.” Yin said before looking at Saraynea. “Stay away from Bloodclaw.” She said in a stern

tone.

“I guess he’s a not so well-trained tiger?” Saraynea questioned.

“Just stay away from him, ok? It’s for your own safety!” Yin snapped before running down the stone path toward where the tigers had gone.

“Your friend doesn’t seem to like me very much.” Saraynea said in a low voice.

“I’m sorry she snapped at you like that, but please don’t judge her just yet. She’s actually just as happy to see you as I am.” Lily said.

“She has a strange way of showing it.”

“When you were born, she swore that she would protect you just as she watches out for me. As soon as we realized that you were missing, she immediately began to search the territory for any signs of where you were taken. She and Frostfur would be gone for hours and they’d return exhausted from searching. She refused to give up, but when she refused to eat or sleep, I became worried about her. I couldn’t lose both of you, so I had to tell her to stop looking. She never stopped blaming herself for you being kidnapped.”

“Well, I’m here now right?”

“I have to admit that I think she’s acting a bit strange too. I’m not too sure why, but I do hate seeing her like this.” Lily finished. Saraynea looked at her, but she kept her gaze locked toward where Yin went. She could see that Lily was upset as she thought about her friend.

“I guess I should talk to her then.” Saraynea said and Lily looked at her with an appreciative expression.

“I’ll wait here for a moment then.” Lily smiled and Saraynea continued along the stone path.

Yin sat in front of a pond that was surrounded by a thick and flourishing

garden. Flowers, bushes, and trees grew freely and untrimmed. The stone path curved around the garden as if the plants were in charge of where the path was allowed to be instead of the garden being organized around the pattern of stones. The garden was so quiet that it seemed like an entirely new world away from the town. Frostfur pressed his head against her and nuzzled her, but she continued to stare at the still water of the pond.

“What will she think of me when she finds out that I’m the reason she was taken from her home?” Yin asked in a low voice.

“May I sit with you?” Saraynea asked as she stood behind Yin.

“Of course, young princess.” Yin replied. Saraynea sat next to her, but they stayed silent for several moments.

“This garden is amazing. I see why you and Princess Lily come here when you’re stressed.” Saraynea said.

“This is my favorite place in the entire territory.” Yin said, though it was obvious that she was somewhat uncomfortable and stiff.

“It reminds of me of where I met my best friend.”

“Which one of your friends is that?”

“Feleine.”

“Ah, the silver-furred panda.”

“She helped to protect me when I was being chased down by a group of jerks that followed me no matter where I went. Even though she was strong, she was so shy when I first met her. Now, she’s the most amazing friend I ever could have wished for. She’s always there for me whenever I need her.”

“Sounds like a true best friend.”

“Yeah. Though, I never would have met her if I was never taken from this temple.” Yin slowly turned to look at Saraynea and was surprised to see her

staring back with a smile. "I never would have met her or any of my other friends who I've come to love as my family. So, don't be mad at yourself anymore, because I don't blame you for anything."

"Thank you." Yin replied as her expression softened into a smile.

"Well, looks like you two are getting along." Yin and Saraynea turned to see Lily approaching them. "Lunch will be served soon. You may go back inside the temple to be with your friends if you want. We'll join you shortly." Lily said to Saraynea who smiled and nodded before standing and walking along the stone path back toward the temple. She turned for a moment to see that Yin was still in a better mood as Lily sat beside her. Frostfur trotted up to her.

"I'm glad I know that I don't have to be afraid of you." She smiled and scratched the top of Frostfur's head when she heard a faint sound on a breeze. She made her way behind a tree and focused her hearing as she peeked at Lily and Yin.

"Yeah, she still calls you 'princess'." Yin said. "She has a lot to get adjusted to. She seems to be calming down though, so maybe we just need to give her more time."

"I just..." Lily's tone was clearly full of sadness. "I want nothing more than to hug her as tightly as I can and just be a mother to her."

"With the time you had with her when she was cub, you were an amazing mother. You took great care of her and tended to her every need. I wish we never lost her either, but she's with us now. Everything will work out." Yin comforted.

"Hey..." Yin and Lily turned and saw Saraynea standing behind them with tears in her eyes. "When I was in the orphanage as a cub, I spent a lot of time wondering what it would be like to have a mom." Saraynea's voice began to shake and tears flooded her eyes. "Even though I was left there, I always wondered if my mother loved me even a little at some point." Lily stepped up to

Saraynea and placed her paws on her cheeks.

“From the moment you were born, I loved you with all my heart. Even though we became separated, I never stopped loving you.” She said. As Saraynea’s crying continued, Lily wrapped her arms around her, allowing Saraynea to cry into her shoulder. “I’m so glad that you’re home.”

“Me too, Mom.” Saraynea sniffled. “Me too.” She said, and Lily held her even tighter. Frostfur rubbed his head against Yin who smiled and wiped her own tears away from her eyes.

Part 5

Saraynea walked with Korramaru along the stone path that led to the garden.

“That lunch was so good.” Korramaru said with a smile.

“Yeah, but it’s different than Huo’s cooking. I can tell when he eats that he’s judging every part of the meals.” Saraynea said. “That’s the path that will take you to where Stormfang is.” She pointed to where the stones met with the dirt path.

“Awesome! I just want to check on him. I’ll see you around.” Korramaru walked toward the tiger dens.

“Saraynea.” Lily greeted as she approached. “Do you have a moment?”

“Of course.” Saraynea replied.

“I was talking to Earthfur about you being a shaman. I almost can’t believe that we did manage to bring another one to our world.” She smiled.

“He’s the one who trained me how to fight. It’s so crazy that we met and didn’t know that we were family.”

“The spirits are always watching out for us. There’s actually one that I want you to meet.” Lily closed her eyes and placed a paw on her chest, summoning a massive blue and red flame. The fire took a shape of a red guardian lion. Her mane, paws, and wings burned with blue and white flames. “This is Adena. She’s my spirit guardian.”

“Wow! Your guardian is a lion too!” Saraynea smiled.

“You know of another one?” Lily asked. After a bright flash forced her to cover her eyes, she stared at Hototo with a curious expression.

“Hototo is my spirit guardian. He took care of me when I was a cub.” Saraynea said.

“I’m so relieved to know that you had a spirit to protect you while you were away from home.” Lily smiled at Hototo.

“Home?” he questioned as he turned to Saraynea.

“That’s right. It turns out that this is where I was born. I was stolen when I was really small, so that’s how I ended up at the orphanage.” Saraynea explained. Hototo snarled and dragged his claws against the stones.

“If only I had been there, I would have done anything to help!” he grumbled.

“The connection between a spirit and their partner takes time to build. Only when both have enough strength can a guardian locate their partner and travel between the spirit and mortal realms.” Lily tried to comfort him.

“Maybe a tour of the territory would be appropriate.” Adena started to get Hototo’s attention. “Knowing this land as well as its parallel in the spirit realm will prove helpful with protecting our partners.” She finished. Hototo nodded and Adena spread her wings. “We’ll start with the spirit realm and fly to make this quicker.” She stared at Hototo for a moment.

“I cannot fly.” He said as he stared at the ground.

“Oh.” Adena quickly folded her fiery wings at her sides. “I hope you’re fast on your feet then.”

“I can handle running.” He replied and the two spirits dashed away from the temple while Lily and Saraynea watched. After they could no longer be seen, Saraynea’s ears drooped.

“I didn’t mean to make him feel responsible for that day.”

“Don’t worry. He’s a guardian spirit. It’s simply his nature to be protective

over you.” Lily said.

“Hopefully he’ll feel better after running around...out there.”

“I’m sorry that you’re still confined to the temple.” Lily said. “When the time is right, I will show you the entirety of this territory.”

“It’s ok.” Saraynea smiled. “I don’t mind being here since I still have a lot to learn about this place. I get to spend more time getting to know everyone in the temple too and spend more time with you.” She finished. Lily smiled back and they continued to walk together.

Saraynea walked down a quiet hallway of the temple as she searched for her friends.

“Princess.” A voice called. “Princess Saraynea!” the voice turned harsh. Saraynea turned and saw Myra approaching her with an angry scowl. “Unless there is some sort of emergency, if someone calls to you, *especially* the advisor, you should stop and listen!” she growled.

“Oh, sorry. I’m still getting used to being called a princess.” Saraynea replied with lowered ears.

“Well, start getting used to it and quickly. It’s not like you’re going to stay inside the temple for the rest of your life. Everyone around will know you as *Princess* Saraynea once we let our citizens and allies know of your return.” Myra explained.

“When will I have to meet everyone?” Saraynea asked nervously at the thought.

“We’re not sure yet. You still need some refining with your manners of course, but we’ll get to that. I’d like to talk to you about something else first.”

“Right now? I was on my way to the library where my friends are...” Saraynea paused as Myra glared at her with an impatient and serious expression.

“Will this take long?” she asked, causing Myra to smile.

“As the advisor of this temple, one of my various important tasks is to look at a situation from every angle to ensure that Princess Lily makes the best possible decisions for the territory. Now that you’ve returned, I will be sharing my opinions with you as well. Your return is actually an event that requires delicate thinking.”

“Why?”

“Well, your mother is of royal blood whereas that brown bear is not.”

“Earthfur? We know that.”

“Princess Lily made a...risky decision in choosing him for a mate. I still don’t understand what she was thinking at the time.” Myra grumbled.

“They fell in love. What’s so wrong about that?” Saraynea began to lose patience with Myra.

“Well, you see...it’s just that...” Myra sighed. “I guess there’s no delicate way to put this, but you’re a half-breed.” Myra said. Saraynea did not even know how to reply. She was just as surprised to hear the term as she was hurt by it. “I just have to bring it up so you’re prepared for when you meet the citizens and our allies.”

“Prepared for what?”

“Mixed-bloods are never highly thought of.” Myra placed a paw on Saraynea’s shoulder. “I don’t mean to hurt you by bringing this up. I just want you to be prepared for if any of the citizens show signs of disrespect toward you.”

“Will they really hate me that much?”

“Well, they may not care, but we won’t know that until they find out that Princess Lily not only fell in love with a common-blood, but had his cub too. I’d

be more concerned about our allies. I fear that they might look down on our dear princess and may lose respect for our territory.”

“What should I do?” Saraynea asked in a low voice. Myra opened her mouth, but was quickly interrupted.

“There you are!” Yin greeted loudly as she approached Saraynea.

“Can I help you?” Myra grumbled.

“When do I ever need any help from you?” Yin asked, causing Myra to tense with rage. “I came to find the young princess. Lily wanted to speak with her.” Yin placed a paw on Saraynea’s shoulder and started to walk with her.

“We are in the middle of a very important conversation!” Myra growled.

“Sorry, but, Lily wants to see her and I’m sure what she has to say is more important.” Yin continued to lead Saraynea away. Even when they walked down a different hallway, Saraynea continued to think about what Myra told her. “What did my mother want?” She asked without looking toward Yin.

“Oh, I only said that to get you away from Myra.” Yin replied.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

“If anyone bothers you, don’t hesitate to ask for help.” Yin stopped walking. “Here we are.” She said and pushed on a large door. Saraynea stepped into the massive library and smiled at the sight of her friends sitting in various sofas and chairs as they investigated scrolls and books. When they saw her walk in, they each stood from their seats and bowed to her.

“Don’t ever do that again.” Saraynea said.

“I told you all that she couldn’t care.” Korramaru said as they all relaxed again.

“Thank the spirits.” Achamaru smiled. “That felt weird.”

“That Myra lady told us to do that whenever we see you.” Ayumei said.

“She what?” Yin asked.

“After Snowflower and Snowflurry brought us here, Myra came in and had a meeting to tell us how to act toward Sara.” Longwei explained.

“But the princess doesn’t want us to, so I guess it doesn’t matter.” Mynh said.

“If you must, just play along with her game when she’s around.” Yin said. “Just make sure that you don’t let her push you around. She likes to try to bend rules.” She finished with a low growl.

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” Achamaru said. “We’ve tackled more difficult problems.” Everyone shared the same look of confidence.

“You’re right about that.” Korramaru smirked. “How can a snobby advisor be any worse than what we’ve been through?”

“As easy as it is, do not underestimate her.” Yin warned.

“You’ve certainly been much nicer to us, so I trust your words over hers.” Huo said. Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Don’t worry too much about Myra. I’ll take care of keeping an eye on her.” Yin said and she turned to leave the library.

Myra only heard her own hind claws tap against the stone steps as she descended into the basement of the temple. She approached a wooden door and opened it to see several temple guards inside. Some stood around the perimeter of the room while others sat at a large table in the center, but they all turned to face her as she entered.

“Let’s make this quick. It’s too risky for this many of you to be in here at the same time” Myra said as she locked the door.

“I hope the plan will still work out.” A female questioned with a strong

sense of rage and doubt in her voice. Myra glared at her as she approached.

“And what makes you think it will fail?” Myra asked.

“Well...” the female started and raised a finger as she announced each of her points. “Lily’s mate returned, Lily’s daughter returned, and they brought a bunch of friends with them. How are we going to work around all that?”

“You think a common-blood, a mixed-blood princess without a clue as to what the life of a royal is, and their friends are going to get in my way?” Myra replied.

“It does seem kind of tricky though.” Another guard said. “How are we supposed to murder three royals and not get caught?”

“We don’t have to kill all three right away. In fact, the plan barely has to change at all. The only thing I’m considering is changing our target.”

“What’s the plan, Boss?” A guard asked as he and all the others moved closer to listen.

“We use the potion on the young princess instead.” Myra said.

“Are you sure you still want to use the potion? We’ve tried several times to poison Lily, but Yin always gets in the way.”

“Yeah, shouldn’t we get Yin out of the way first?” Myra sighed at the question.

“As much as I hate her, I have to admit that she’s not stupid. It’s true that she has thwarted our every attempt to poison Lily, but if we don’t target Lily, then Yin won’t be a problem. If we target the naïve young princess, she won’t suspect a thing.” Myra explained.

“But, if we kill Lily first, wouldn’t the young princess be easier to trick into giving the temple over to you?”

“It amazes me how you guards know so little about the temple you

protect..." Myra sighed. "If we kill Lily first, the temple immediately goes to her daughter. She may be a half-breed, but she does still carry Lily's blood." Myra explained.

"What about Lily's mate? What if he ends up with the temple?"

"He is the last one we need to be concerned about. Without a drop of royal blood in his veins, there's no chance that he can control the temple." Myra said.

"But, wouldn't Lily give the temple over to her mate before her advisor?"

"Do you forget how much power I have as the advisor?" Myra snapped. "I just have to make sure that Lily understands that the citizens of this territory and the leaders of our allies would never accept a common-blood being in charge of a territory. Once I am the leader of this territory, I can do whatever I want with them. Of course, you'll all earn those promised promotions for your loyalty." Myra glanced at her followers who all smiled at the thought of her promise to them.

Saraynea stared at the dark ceiling from her bed. She leaned up and turned her gaze to the bed where Feleine slept. Already knowing that she did not know what she would say if she woke her up, Saraynea instead got out of bed and quietly made her way to the door. Sneaking outside was not difficult since not many guards were patrolling and she quickly found herself outside where it was gently snowing.

She watched the fluffy snowflakes stick to the ground for a moment and found the chill air to be comforting before she continued to walk again. The layer of snow that formed on the stone path was enough to prevent her claws from tapping, allowing her to walk in silence. As she walked toward the center of the garden where the pond was, she began to notice bright colorful lights.

When she stood before the pond, she stared at the plants in awe. Most of the plants surrounding the pond brightly showed off their colors through patterns

that appeared on the petals of flowers which shone of the color of the flower, green plants had bright blue patterns, and even along the bark of the trees were white markings which she had never seen before. The colors reflected off the snow and water of the pond, making Saraynea feel like she was standing in a spherical rainbow.

“She couldn’t wait for you to see this place at night.” Yin said as she walked up to Saraynea from behind.

“It’s so beautiful! What are these plants?” Saraynea asked.

“She grew this entire garden on her own. Her spirit brought her seeds from the spirit realm one day which Lily planted and these are the plants that grew. You can’t see their patterns during the day, but they glow like this every night.” Yin placed her paw against one of the trees, causing the white light it emitted to become even brighter. Saraynea gently pressed one of her fingers against a blue flower and smiled as it shone brighter. “I’m not even a shaman and I love being out here.”

“You because you followed me out here, right?”

“I’m not here to force you to go back inside the temple. I’ve sensed your tension since your talk with Myra.” Saraynea’s ears flattened, but she did not turn or say anything. “Whatever she told you, it was likely a lie. Don’t let her stress you out.” Yin continued.

“Well, she was right this time.”

“What did she say to you?” Yin asked. Saraynea stayed silent for a moment before she turned to face her.

“She said she was concerned about my return.”

“Why would that be a bad thing?”

“Because I’m...a half-breed.”

“She called you a half-breed?” Yin growled.

“But, she’s right. My mother is a royal and my father isn’t. I don’t care as much about being a mixed-blood, but I’d hate for the reputation of this territory to fall because of me.”

“The reputation of this territory is maintained through the actions of the royals. The type of blood you have doesn’t mean anything if you’re a great leader.”

“How do I do that? How do I make sure I turn into the leader that this territory needs? I was raised by my guardian spirit in the forests! What if I mess up? What if I’m not a good princess?”

“Sure, you have a lot to learn, but even Lily had to learn everything she knows about being a princess and leading her territory. No one expects you to be perfect. You just came back.”

“Where do I even start? There must be so much that I have to learn.”

“You can start by getting some rest.” Yin smiled. “How can we even teach you the basics if you’re not comfortable in your own temple? I know it’s intimidating knowing how much you have to get adjusted to now that you’re a member of the temple, but you have plenty of time to learn and get used to everything.” Saraynea thought for a moment before she smiled back at Yin.

“What was that?” Korramaru mumbled from her bed.

“Sounded like Sara.” Kheiryn laughed. After a moment, another snore confirmed her statement.

“Yup. That’s Sara.” Korramaru placed her pillow over her head to try to block out the sound.

“It’s too early...” Ayumei whined as she opened her eyes to see the red-orange light of dawn in the room.

“It’s a good thing Huo thinks it’s cute.” Achamaru laughed.

“She hasn’t snored since we got here.” Feleine stared at Saraynea with a smile.

“There’s something odd about Sara and not snoring being used in the same sentence.” Mynh said.

“She’s been having a lot of trouble sleeping lately.” Feleine started. “It’s nice to see her finally able to get some rest.” She finished and closed her eyes as she tried to get more sleep before starting the day.

Part 6

Everyone sat at the dining table for breakfast as they did every morning. They enjoyed talking together, except Saraynea whose gaze was locked onto Lily. For several moments, she watched her mother nudge her food around, but was barely eating.

“Mother?” Saraynea asked in a low voice.

“Yes Saraynea?” Lily greeted back with a smile, but Saraynea knew that it was being forced and that her mother was clearly exhausted.

“Are you ok? You don’t look well.”

“A little tired again, but I’m sure I’ll feel better soon. I’m probably just catching a cold. It’s nothing to be too worried about.” Lily said. After fidgeting with her food for another moment, she placed her paw on her forehead.

“What’s wrong?” Yin asked.

“I’m going to lie down for a while. With enough rest I’m sure I’ll feel better soon.” Lily weakly stood up and walked out of the room.

“I should probably stay with her.” Yin stood up.

“I remember the soup my mom made for me whenever I got sick. It always seemed to help too.” Huo said.

“Really?” Saraynea asked with hopeful eyes.

“It’s one of the many recipes that have been passed down in my family for generations.” Huo smiled.

“Would you mind making some for her?” Yin asked.

“Me? Like, to make it myself? In the kitchen?” Huo questioned.

“Of course you’d have to make it.” Yin smiled. “The recipe belongs to your family, right?”

“I’d love to!” Huo cheered. “Saraynea, will you assist me?”

“Of course.” Saraynea smiled.

“I’ll show you to the kitchen then. I’ll tell the cooks to follow your instructions.” Yin said.

“Yin...” Earthfur said to get her attention. “May I join you when you go to see Lily? I want to help her however I can.”

“I’m sure she’ll enjoy the company. Let’s get the chefs into the kitchen first.” Yin smiled at the enthusiasm of Huo’s and Saraynea’s faces.

Huo worked swiftly while still being careful to retain his high standards. He was silent unless he needed to give instructions and his face showed how serious he was about making sure that the soup was perfect. After adding the herbs he had chopped, he took a small spoon and tasted the broth.

“More carrots!” he ordered. After a moment, a cook approached him with a bowl of chopped carrots.

“Are these the right size?” she asked.

“Yes! They’re perfect!” Huo smiled and dumped the entire bowl into the pot. He took a moment to approach Saraynea and watched as she ground pepper in a small bowl.

“I hope I’m doing this right.” She said, sensing that he was behind her. He quickly inspected crushed pepper.

“You’re doing a great job.” He praised.

“Well, I am learning from the best.” She smiled. Huo kissed her as his thanks before returning to the pot. She continued to stare at him as he either approved of the work of the cooks or gave them advice before sending them

back. Saraynea could not help but smile since it had been several days since she had seen him cook.

“He’s cute, huh?” Yin smirked, breaking Saraynea’s trance.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you there.” Saraynea’s ears flattened for a moment.

“You were pretty busy staring at him to notice me.” Yin laughed. “Reminds me of when your mother met Earthfur.”

“I guess that makes sense. Huo is my mate.”

“Seriously?” Yin asked. Saraynea pulled her necklace out from under shirt and held the gem in her paw. “Wow, he was serious about you! That’s a nice pairing gift.” Yin curiously tilted her head when Saraynea let it fall under her shirt again. “Why do you keep it tucked away like that?” Saraynea placed her paw on her shirt where the gem rested against her chest.

“I don’t want to lose it.” she replied.

“That’s a good reason.” Yin said. “I understand the importance of a special gift.” She touched her tiger pendant with her claws.

“I hope she likes it...” Huo questioned nervously.

“Did you really just say that?” Saraynea asked as they walked down a hallway with Yin who carried the tray with a dome cover to protect Lily’s meal. “Have you ever heard any complaints about your food?”

“Well...no, I guess not, but this time it’s different. I prepared a meal for a princess!”

“It smells amazing.” Yin said. “Once I drop this off to Lily, I’m heading back to the kitchen to grab a bowl for myself. Besides, if you’ve been cooking for Saraynea, then you’ve cooked for a princess plenty of times.” Yin finished as the group approached the door to Lily’s room. Huo opened it so Yin could enter.

Inside, Lily lay in her bed while Earthfur sat on the edge of the bed talking to her. Lily still looked tired and unwell.

“I hope she gets better soon.” Saraynea said quietly to Huo as they stood outside the room.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure she’ll be fine.” Huo began to close the door. Saraynea turned and began to walk away when she noticed that she only heard her own claws tapping against the stone floor. “Huo?” She asked as she turned to see him peeking through a small space of the nearly closed door. “Everything ok?” She stood beside him again, but he did not reply. Saraynea lowered herself in front of Huo to look through the space as well. Lily lifted the first spoonful to her mouth and smiled. “I think she likes it!” Huo whispered happily. After a few quick spoonful’s, Lily placed the spoon on the tray and carefully lifted the bowl with her claws, bring the entire bowl to her lips. Both Yin and Earthfur stared at Lily with surprise.

“Now we can confidently say that she loves it.” Saraynea smiled. With his curiosity satiated, Huo gently closed the door.

“Here are some more magic scrolls.” Snowflower placed several scrolls on the table.

“Awesome! Thanks!” Ayumei said without looking up from the scroll she was already reading.

“The battle history of this territory is impressive.” Achamaru read from another scroll while keeping open books in front of her as well. “Looking at the artwork makes me want to wear my own armor again.”

“Since all I need are my bow and arrows, I’m happy that I’ll still be able to wear this kimono.” Mynh said before turning to Shadestep. “You sure you don’t want try one on?”

“They’re just not my style.” He replied through his scarf.

“At least some of us haven’t forgotten to stay focused. I haven’t practiced my healing in a while.” Feleine said.

“Your healing has been improving just fine.” Saraynea reassured her friend.

“You seem incredibly focused on what you’ve been reading.” Korramaru said to Kheiryn who not only had opened scrolls and books on the table in front of her, but also held some scrolls up using shadow tendrils which she would occasionally glance at.

“I’m studying the botany of the territory. I’ve always had a fascination with plants and how they can be mixed into potions.” Kheiryn replied without looking up.

“All of these opened scrolls and books scattered all over the place...” Myra muttered. “The library is such a mess.”

“Stop worrying, Myra.” Lily said in a weak voice. “Since they’re going to be staying with us, it’s good that they’re learning about the different aspects of the territory.”

“Yes, yes, it’s good that they’re learning...” Myra sighed. “But it’s also important to understand that as this mess gets worse, it’ll take longer for everything to be put away! I want everything back in its proper spot and not just thrown on the shelves!” She ordered.

“Myra, please!” Lily whined as she tightly shut her eyes and placed her paw on her forehead. “I came to the library so I could rest in a *quiet* place!” her own building rage caused her headache to painfully pulse several times. As she winced from the pain, Earthfur placed his arms around her to help comfort her.

“You’re getting worse.” He warned. “How much longer are you going to try to ignore this?”

“Maybe we should bring a doctor here?” Longwei suggested.

“You want to bring in a doctor for a headache?” Myra snorted, earning her glares from everyone in the room.

“Don’t you want her to get better?” Ayumei asked in an angry tone.

“Don’t worry, dear. I’m doing my best to find out how to make a potion for her.” Kheiryn said.

“I could make more soup. Or I can make anything else that you’d like.” Huo suggested.

“Well, the first soup didn’t do much, did it?” Myra said, causing Saraynea to stand up in an aggressive stance.

“At least we’re trying!” Saraynea argued. “What have you done other than follow us around and complain?”

“How dare you speak to me like that!” Myra snarled. “Obviously you’ve been spending too much with Yin if you’re learning her disrespectful habits!”

“Have you forgotten that she’s the young princess? How dare *you* speak to her in that tone.” Yin joined the argument.

“She may be the young princess, but she still has a lot to learn and clearly we need to work on respect and mannerisms! Neither of those she will learn from you!” Myra and Yin glared and snarled at each other.

“Enough!” Lily yelled.

“Princess, you can’t just keep letting these behavioral outbursts to go unpunished!” Myra said.

“Myra, just...just get out.” Lily said.

“What!? But...”

“Now.” Lily ordered in a stern tone. Myra stood with a look of shock on her

face for a moment before her expression became serious again and she silently left the library. As soon as she shut the door behind her, Myra quickly made her way along the halls of the temple, glancing at each guard she passed until she caught sight of the one she needed and approached him.

“I need to talk to you.” She said.

“Of course Myra. Is everything alright?” the guard asked in a low voice.

“Several days ago I asked you to do something very important. What was the task I gave you?”

“To start poisoning the princess.” The guard replied nervously as he and Myra occasionally glanced around to make sure no one was watching them.

“Right. I just have one question for you.” She said in a serious tone that caused the guard to look into her eyes. “Which princess did you poison?”

“I...uh...”

“You poisoned Lily didn’t you?”

“Well, you said to poison the princess. You never specified which one.” He nervously explained.

“Well that explains why Saraynea hasn’t been getting sick.”

“What do we do now?” the guard asked. Myra was silent for a moment as she thought.

“Give Lily a full vial of the strongest poison tonight. Tomorrow we move right into the next part of the plan.”

“I’ll let the others know.”

“Good.” Myra said with a smile.

Over the next several days, Lily’s condition worsened. Her exhaustion prevented her from trying to hide how sick she was. One day, everyone waited at

the dining table with worry when Lily was later than usual. “Yin!” Snowflurry cried as she ran into the dining room.

“What is it?” Yin asked. Saraynea and her friends stood up from their seats to listen to Snowflurry.

“Princess Lily! She collapsed in the hallway outside her room!” Snowflurry said with a worried expression.

“Come on!” Yin ordered and they all ran out of the room.

“Earthfur and my sister are with her, but she doesn’t look good.” Snowflurry continued.

“Lily!” Yin called when she saw Earthfur kneeling on the floor carefully holding Lily in his arms. “What happened?”

“She didn’t look good this morning, but she suddenly began to writhe in pain and started to uncontrollably cough.” Earthfur said.

“Mom...” Saraynea whispered as she knelt beside her father.

“I don’t care what she says! She needs a doctor, now!” Snowflower said.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.” Lily said weakly as she forced herself to stand. As soon as she stood up, she brought her arm to her mouth and violently coughed. When she moved her arm away, even she stared with fright at the blood she had coughed up.

“Now we know where Sara got her tenacity from.” Korramaru said.

“We have to get a doctor to look at her. There’s no time to even explain to them. Let’s just bring her to the doctor’s home.” Achamaru suggested.

“Looks like we have another problem.” Mynh warned, causing everyone to redirect their attention to the guards on both ends of the hallway they stood in.

“I have a bad feeling about this.” Longwei said as he and the others got into

fighting poses.

“Why are you just standing there? Get help!” Yin ordered, but the guards began to march toward them.

“Why are they acting like this?” Lily questioned. Suddenly the guards charged at them. Feleine leaped in front of her friends and used her swift defensive techniques to dodge the glaives of the temple guards as well as grab the handles to force them off balance. Behind them, Longwei used similar abilities to do the same.

“This is getting us nowhere fast.” Mynh said as she readied an arrow.

“Wait!” Lily called. “Don’t hurt them!”

“We can’t just sit here like this.” Mynh argued with a sympathetic expression.

“Why would the temple guards just turn like this?” Achamaru questioned.

“Hold on...” Ayumei said. “I think I sense something.” She continued.

“Sense what exactly?” Achamaru asked.

“There’s magic energy around their heads.”

“And what does that mean?” Yin asked.

“It’s possible that their actions are being controlled by some kind of mind magic.” Ayumei explained.

“Can you remove it?” Korramaru asked.

“Well, if it was placed on them individually, then a good punch or kick to their heads should be enough to break the magic barrier.” Ayumei explained. Feleine delivered a powerful kick with the back of her foot, knocking her target against the stone wall. He stood up and snarled as Feleine backed away.

“And if that doesn’t work?” Feleine questioned.

“There must be another source that’s making sure that the spell is constantly inflicting them. The only way to free them is to find where the spell is radiating from.” Ayumei said.

“You mean the source of this spell can be anywhere?” Earthfur asked with worry.

“It looks like only the temple guards are affected with it. It’s possible that the source of the spell is within the temple if they’re the only targets.” Ayumei answered.

“How are we supposed to get a doctor for Lily if the guards are under this control spell?” Huo questioned.

“Kheiryn, you’re our master of potions. Any ideas?” Korramaru asked.

“If I can find out what is causing her illness, then I should be able to find out what herbs I need to counter her symptoms.” Kheiryn said.

“We need to hurry to the alchemy room then.” Yin said.

“Yin...” Lily started. “We need to evacuate this half of the town. I don’t want anyone to get hurt, especially if the guards don’t have control over their actions.”

“If they’re all affected by the spell of control, then we don’t have any guards to safely guide the citizens along the path to the valley.” Yin explained.

“We need to come up with a plan!” Feleine warned as she started to grow tired from fending off the guards.

“We’ll guide them.” Mynh said. “Some of us can go into the town to guide the others away from here.”

“But, there’s so few of you!” Lily argued in a worried tone.

“Don’t worry.” Earthfur smiled. “They’re a lot stronger than they look and they have spirit partners that can help them.”

“Shadestep, Feleine, Longwei, Achamaru, you all come with me.” Mynh ordered.

“Feleine, get behind me!” Saraynea ordered and Feleine quickly ducked and moved so she stood behind her friend. Saraynea performed a punch motion, causing a gust of wind to expel from her fist which knocked the guards over. “Let’s go!”

As the group ran, Mynh, Shadestep, Achamaru, Feleine, and Longwei left the others and made their way toward the entrance of the temple to do what they could to keep the citizens safe. Both teams dodged and pushed away any guards who approached them while making sure not to hurt them too badly. Saraynea and the others paused when Lily stopped and began to cough, keeping her paw against the wall to keep her balance. When they prepared to move again, Lily only took a few steps before she fell to her knees. Earthfur rushed to her and lifted her in his arms.

“Stay strong.” He pleaded.

“She’s getting worse so quickly.” Snowflower said.

“How could she be this sick so suddenly?” Snowflurry questioned.

“Snowflower and Snowflurry, guide them to the alchemy room.” Yin said.

“What about you?” Snowflower asked.

“I have a feeling that this illness isn’t natural.” Yin growled.

“You mean, someone did this to her? Why would anyone poison our princess?” Snowflower continued, nearly crying as she watched Lily’s suffering grow as she helplessly rested in Earthfur’s arms.

“I have an idea of who did this to her. I’ll find her and make her suffer.” Yin snarled and prepared to leave the group.

“Yin!” Saraynea’s voice called. Yin stopped and turned. “I’m coming with

you!” Saraynea said.

“No way! Stay with your friends where you’ll be safe!” Yin ordered.

“You know who poisoned my mother. I want to help you.” Saraynea said. Yin stared at her determined expression for a moment.

“I can’t let you. We lost you once already. I can’t risk letting something happen to you again.” Yin said in a soft voice.

“I’m not going to just sit back while my home and family are being attacked!”

“With that attitude, you’re going to be a great leader for this territory.” Yin smiled, but her expression quickly became serious again. “Follow me.”

“Saraynea.” Earthfur said as she and Yin took a few steps away. Saraynea turned and stared at him. “Be careful.” Saraynea was surprised at his comment and worried expression. He was serious about his support and aid when he helped her and her friends defeat Darkstorm, but this time his words felt softer to her.

“I will.” She said and smiled at her father before turning to run with Yin. “Who are we looking for?” Saraynea asked as she followed Yin through the temple.

“Myra.” Yin growled.

“Advisor Myra!? Why would she do such a thing? She’s supposed to help my mother!”

“She may be the advisor, but she has no interest in helping Lily run the territory. She’s been trying to murder her for years. She even tried to prevent the temple from being passed down to you when she kidnapped you.”

“She kidnapped me? So that’s how I ended up in the orphanage.” Saraynea and Yin ran down the steps into the basement.

“It was the one time I took my eyes off of you! I failed to keep you safe and now I’m failing Lily!”

“Don’t beat yourself up. It’s amazing that one bear has been able to keep this temple, the territory, and my mother safe. If anyone can cure her, it’s Kheiryn. My friends can easily handle protecting her and helping the citizens get out of here. We just have to focus on finding Myra!”

“She spends a lot of time in her study room down here. I’m sure we’ll find a clue about what her exact plans are.”

“Which room is it?” Saraynea asked as she glanced at each wooden door.

“That one!” Yin said and pointed toward the door they ran straight toward. Saraynea opened her palm, summoning winds that swirled around her paw. After releasing the winds, the door to Myra’s study room broke from the doorway and shattered into chunks of wood. “That’s one way to get inside.” Yin said, impressed by Saraynea’s power. “There must be something in here that can help.” She began to quickly search around the room while Saraynea pressed her paw against the cold stone wall.

“There’s a tunnel.” Saraynea said.

“What?” Yin questioned.

“Behind the scroll shelf.” Saraynea turned her head to face the large shelf. Yin stepped beside the shelf and began to push it, revealing a tunnel with downward leading stairs. Saraynea and Yin silently ventured into the tunnel until the path was blocked by a wall of fire.

“Well, now we know for sure that this place is suspicious.” Yin said. Saraynea raised her paw, and a new fire formed at the base of the burning wall. Saraynea’s fire began to climb up, consuming the obstacle before quickly diminishing, allowing them to continue. The tunnel brought them to a massive open room. “Why is it so hot in here?” Yin asked as she looked around the open

room.

“Because we’re inside a volcano.” Saraynea answered. At her feet, a purple blob of energy formed and quickly reached up, coiling around her like a snake. Yin quickly turned toward her, but before she could even react, a portal opened behind her.

“What?” Yin questioned as she saw the town through the portal.

“Yin! Behind you!” Saraynea warned. Yin turned, but only saw a flash of purple before she was struck by the energy and forced through the portal. She suddenly realized that she was staring at the sky, dizzy and unable to adjust until she slammed onto the roof of a building. Her body ached from the impact and her vision grew blurry when she began to hear satisfied laughter.

“Myra?” she questioned in a low voice.

Part 7

Earthfur growled at any guards that approached him. With Lily in his arms, he was unable to fight back. All he could do to keep his mate safe was to keep her away from the mind controlled guards. Snowflower, Snowflurry, and Huo stayed close to him as well since Ayumei, Kheiryn and Korramaru did their best to keep the guards away.

“How much further?” Korramaru asked as she punched a guard in his face.

“We’re almost there.” Snowflower replied.

“We’d be there already if not for all these guards blocking the way.” Snowflurry said in a sad tone. She turned her head and shrieked when a guard raised her weapon at her. Ayumei stepped in front of her and blocked the weapon with an arcane barrier.

“We’re doing our best, but there’s just so many of them!” Ayumei said.

“I hope Saraynea and Yin find a way to fix them soon.” Korramaru said as she battled with another guard. She heard a loud clang and turned her head to see a female moon bear guard standing behind her with her glaive pressed against the weapon of another guard. A male brown bear guard rammed into the controlled guard to send him away from the group.

“Please, allow us to help.” The female guard asked.

“What makes you special enough to not be under the control spell?” Korramaru asked with her blades readied.

“Wait! We don’t want to fight you!” the male guard said. “I am Mudhide and this is Stormcloud. We were given scrolls with a rune that keeps us immune to the control spell.”

“Where exactly did you get them?” Kheiryn asked.

“We got them from Myra.” Stormcloud answered. Korramaru snarled and raised her blades at her.

“Mind controlled or not, you’re still one of her puppets, huh?” the enraged warrior growled.

“No! Let me explain!” Stormcloud said. “We...we were secretly loyal to Myra. For years we discussed plans to help her take the temple.”

“But when this plan went into action, we never expected things to become so... chaotic.” Mudhide added.

“Why would you help Myra harm the princess?” Snowflurry asked.

“She promised us a better leader to follow. She said the royal family was growing weak.” The brown bear explained.

“It made sense when Myra talked to us about how to make the territory stronger, but now I’m pretty sure that she’s crazy!” Stormcloud continued.

“So, how many of you betrayed our princess!?” Snowflower growled.

“There are others. We all shared similar concerns when this madness started. We split up to try to find you and see if we could help make things right again.” Mudhide said.

“Some went outside to make sure the citizens aren’t getting hurt. There are only two that we know of for sure that are still loyal to Myra: another guard named Ragestrike and the temple alchemist, Leafpaw, who made the poison.” The female continued.

“So you know exactly who caused *this* to happen!?” Earthfur growled as he turned to the two guards. The expressions of both guards filled with sadness at the sight of the sick princess. “Where can we find them?”

“Last I saw them, they were heading toward the alchemy room.” Stormcloud

said.

“Perfect. We’re heading there ourselves.” Kheiryn said.

Mudhide and Stormcloud led the group through the halls of the temple.

“The alchemy room is just down this hallway.” Stormcloud said and everyone turned the corner, but stopped abruptly. Stormcloud and Mudhide stared at a guard blocked their path. Ayumei turned and prepared an arcane wall to prevent the controlled guards from following them.

“Traitors!” the guard roared.

“Open your eyes, Ragestrike!” Stormcloud growled. “Look at the madness Myra has caused! You still think you can trust her as the queen?”

“I trust her more than a half-breed princess who has spent her life living on the streets! How embarrassing that our princess would choose a common blood for a mate. Myra can fix this.” Ragestrike said.

“These bears have no royal blood, yet they’re using all their strength to protect it!” Mudhide pointed to the team behind him. “Myra blinded us with her prejudice assumptions. Lily has been a great leader to us and I have faith in our young princess.”

“If he won’t listen, then there’s nothing more we can do.” Stormcloud readied her weapon. “We don’t have time to argue. Lily needs medicine!”

“I didn’t poison her just to sit back and watch you destroy everything Myra is trying to build!” Ragestrike charged toward them. Korramaru ran up to him and their weapons clashed.

“I won’t let you take another step toward the princess!” Korramaru snarled. Mudhide and Stormcloud dashed in front of her and began to fight with Ragestrike.

“Just go!” Stormcloud said.

“We’ll stay here and fight. You have to get to the alchemy room!” Mudhide added. The others nodded and continued down the hallway. “You too, little mage.” The brown bear said to Ayumei, who continued to keep her barrier up.

“Are you sure? The others will get in.” Ayumei replied, reluctant to leave Stormcloud and Mudhide outnumbered.

“You have to stay with the princess. She needs as many protectors as possible right now.” Mudhide said. Ayumei channeled a large amount of arcane energy into her barrier, allowing it to stand even after she stepped away.

“That should help it hold for a little longer. Be careful.” Ayumei said and ran to join the others. When she saw them again, the group stood before a single male panda who wore a robe and had several vials of liquids at his belt.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that you all managed to get passed Ragestrike.” The panda smiled, yet he still looked nervous as he eyed the team.

“I tried to give the shield some more power, but I don’t know how long it’ll hold on its own.” Ayumei said.

“Mudhide and Stormcloud did us a huge favor by keeping that other guard busy.” Huo said. “We have to deal with this guy fast so we don’t waste the time their help.”

“I, Leafpaw, the greatly skilled alchemist of this temple, will not allow you to waste my poison by curing Lily!” Leafpaw said loudly.

“We don’t have time for this!” Kheiryn said and her wings unraveled. Leafpaw’s face filled with fear at the sight of the black tendrils that approached him. He turned, but two tendrils wrapped around his heels and dragged him toward the group.

“Spirits help me!” Leafpaw whimpered.

“You poisoned a shaman and now you expect the spirits to save your hide!?”

Kheiryn growled. “Give me some room!” she ordered and the others stood close to the walls. Kheiryn used her tendrils to toss the alchemist down the hallway behind them. Without delay, everyone moved forward.

“That’s the alchemy room!” Snowflurry ran up to a large door and pushed it open.

Part 8

Earthfur sat on the edge of the bed where Lily lay. Next to the bed was a large desk where Kheiryn was frantically opening and reading through the alchemy guides that Snowflower and Snowflurry were gathering for her. Ayumei also read through the books, trying to find information that might help Kheiryn. Huo and Korramaru pressed their bodies against the door, trying to keep it shut as the mind controlled guards pounded on it from outside the room.

“Have you found what’s making her so sick?” Earthfur asked.

“I’m trying, Earthfur.” Kheiryn answered without looking away from the book. “As soon as I find out what exactly has poisoned her, I can follow to instructions to make the medicine that will cure her.”

“Listen to me...please.” Lily said weakly. “I appreciate how much you’re trying to help me, but finding Saraynea is more important than saving me.”

“Lily, please!” Earthfur pleaded as he grabbed her paw. “Don’t give up! We will find a way to heal you!”

“You have to destroy whatever is controlling the temple guards.” Lily argued. “Once they’re freed, they can keep Saraynea safe. If I die, the temple and territory gets passed to her, but if she gets hurt, then the temple is lost! She still carries my royal blood. Her life is more important than mine!”

“Sara would never forgive us if we just gave up.” Kheiryn said. “Even when all hope seemed lost, when all the odds were against us, when we were broken and beaten, Sara didn’t give up on us. She had more reasons to distrust me, yet she still welcomed me as a friend. Right now she’s trusting me to save your life and I will not let her down.”

“The sooner you get better, the sooner we can go and look for her.”

Korramaru said.

“Sooner would certainly be better.” Huo said. “I don’t know how much longer this door will hold!”

“I hope everyone outside is ok.” Ayumei said in a worried tone. “I know they’re together, but guiding the citizens to safety is a big job even for them.”

“Hey, don’t worry Ayumei.” Korramaru said with confidence. “Don’t forget that Stormfang is out there too. He’ll keep them safe if they run into trouble.”

“I know. It’s just that my sister went out there without her armor, her shield, or her sword. She’s brave and strong, but I’m still worried about her.”

Feleine dueled with a temple guard in an alley, where the limited space made avoiding his weapon difficult while he was still able to thrust the sharp blade at her. She felt her back press against the stone wall of the end of the alley. The guard smiled and prepared to strike when an arrow pierced into a wooden crate next to him. Feleine used the valuable moment of his distraction to land a powerful punch to his face, forcing him to fall onto his back.

Feleine looked up and smiled at Mynh, who stood on the roof of the building beside her. “Thanks!” she called out. Mynh smiled back before having to redirect her attention to the guard that approached her. Knowing that she could not hurt the guards, she did not bother to prepare an arrow for her current target. Instead she continued to step backward as the guard slowly approached her. Mynh looked over her shoulder to see how close to the edge of the roof she was. When the guard lunged at her, Mynh fell onto her back and kicked the guard over her. She quickly rolled over to see the guard passed out in a wooden cart below. A scream forced her to her feet and she saw a female tightly holding her cub in her arms as three guards surrounded her. Mynh aimed an arrow to land between two of the guards, causing them to start making their way toward her while the last continued to approach the female. Mynh reached behind her, but no arrows remained in her quiver.

“Dammit!” Mynh growled as she glanced between the two guards that were climbing up the side of the building to get to her and the female who desperately needed her help. “Not a good time to run out of arrows!”

Take aim Mynh. She heard Shadowtalon’s voice in her ears. *As long as we are connected, you are never without arrows.* As Mynh reached for the string of her raised bow, shadow energy formed around her paw and began to form a long, narrow shape as she pulled the string back.

“I don’t want to hurt them.” Mynh said in a low voice as she aimed at the guard below her.

The shadow energy will only do as you desire. Mynh released the energy, sending the black bolt toward the guard. After being struck, the guard began to struggle to stand before falling over. Mynh turned and raised her bow at the two guards who charged at her after climbing onto the roof. As the released shadow bolt traveled, it split into two bolts, striking both guards and causing them to collapse.

“Huh. I can get used to this.” Mynh smiled before making her way down from the roof to approach the female. “You have to rejoin the others and get to safety.”

“What about him?” The female asked as she nervously looked at the guard on the ground.

“Don’t worry. He’s only unconscious.” Mynh replied.

“Look Mama!” the cub in her arms said as he pointed with a claw. “A spirit!” he continued, causing his mother and Mynh to turn and see Shadowtalon standing in the darkness of the alley.

“The princess must have asked the spirits to aid us.” The mother smiled.

“You must go.” Shadowtalon started. “They’re not a threat when asleep, but

the guards will awaken.” he said. The mother nodded and made her way toward the valley path. “I wish to help you.” He said to Mynh. “Is it too soon to test your new skills from the sky?” Mynh looked down at her open palm for a moment before closing it into a tight fist. She felt a strong energy flowing through her paw.

“Let’s go.” She said with confidence.

Longwei stared at his opponent who growled back. The guard charged but he quickly overpowered him and knocked him out with a swift strike of his paw to the head of the guard.

“Oh dear.” He muttered as his next challenger approached him. The female struck quickly with her glaive, but Longwei dodged and blocked each of her attacks. He managed to grab the handle of her weapon right below the blade and stared at her nervously as she snarled at him. “Winning a challenge against another male is one thing, but honestly, I’d really rather not hit you.” He said. Both Longwei and the female turned their heads when they heard a loud yell rushing toward them. The female released her grip on her glaive, leaving Longwei to hold it while he stood back and watched her and Achamaru enter an intense paw-to-paw fight which ended when Achamaru knocked out the guard with a strike of her fist to their face. Achamaru continued to heavily gasp as sweat dripped from her fur.

“You know, if you worked on your form and used less aggression, you’d make a pretty good monk.” Longwei said. Achamaru smiled in amusement. “Seriously though, are you sure you’re ok out here without your armor?”

“Armor or no armor, I’m still a warrior and I still have a job to do.”

“I admire your dedication, but maybe you should at least catch your breath before getting into another fight.” Longwei suggested.

“That doesn’t sound like a bad idea. You be careful out there too.” She said

before Longwei departed.

I'm glad to know how committed you are to your role as a guardian

“Armorscale?” Achamaru questioned in a low voice.

As guardians, it is our job to protect others. The injured, weak, and defenseless depend on us to keep them safe.

A blue aura surrounded Achamaru and formed armor that covered her body. More aura swirled in a large circle at her forearm and hardened into a shield.

While a strong defense is vital, we also strike at our enemies with great ferocity

Achamaru's paw closed around the handle of a sword that formed from another burst of aura. When a shadow began to grow in front of her, she turned to see Armorscale behind her.

“We will be able to provide an even better defense by working together.” Armorscale said.

“I'm used to working in a pair, so your help and company are certainly appreciated.” Achamaru replied.

Ayumei, I know you're the only one who can deactivate the scroll of control, but please be careful. Whoever is behind this is clearly strong to be able to take control of the temple's guards. For them to leave the temple defenseless, their intentions are clearly sinister. Achamaru thought as she feared for her sister's safety.

Feleine tried to catch her breath as she stood before a duo of passed out guards. Her eyes automatically stared at the moving shadow before her. She turned to see another guard preparing to attack her when Hototo rammed into them.

“Thanks Hototo.” Feleine smiled.

“Of course.” He replied as he walked up to her. “Saraynea is not with you?”

“I’m afraid not. She stayed inside the temple to track down the source of whoever took control of the temple guards.” Feleine explained.

“So that’s why they started acting strange. Adena and I began to guide the citizens out of this town, but when we sensed the presence of the other spirits, I came to investigate. Now that Shadowtalon and Armorscale are out here, I’d like to find Saraynea and make sure that she is alright.”

“So these other spirits are allies of yours?” Adena asked as she approached Hototo and Feleine. “If they’re here to help, then I can return to Lily. She needs me...I can feel it.” Adena said before charging off toward the temple.

“Will she be ok heading in there by herself? Why doesn’t she just teleport herself to Lily?” Feleine asked.

“We’re already in this realm. It would be a waste of energy to go to the spirit realm just to travel back. Since I can sense that Saraynea is inside the temple as well, I will be with Adena if she needs help.”

“Be careful in there. Whatever we’re up against here, it seems serious if it wants to take over the temple.” Feleine warned. Hototo nodded before running toward the temple.

Part 9

Yin slowly leaned up so that she sat on the roof that she had fallen onto. She glanced around, but did not see anyone else. Her ears perked and she turned to see another flash of purple before the attack sent her to the roof of the next building. She tried to lean up again as she battled with the pain she felt from the impact of the arcane attack. When she looked toward the roof she had been thrown from, she saw Myra with her paws engulfed in arcane energy.

“That felt even better than I thought it would!” Myra yelled.

“You’re a mage?” Yin questioned.

“You know much more about me than the princess, but you don’t know everything!” Myra spread her fingers, concentrating arcane energy into a large ball between her paws. Yin stood and prepared to run, but Myra’s attack struck her back and sent her to the road below. With each hit, the struggle to deal with the pain and stand grew.

“My original plan was to just kill the king and queen and then the temple would have been handed down to me.” Myra began to prepare another ball of energy between her paws.

“Then Lily was born and the temple and territory was handed to her tiny paws! All I had to do was convince her to pass the temple over to me, but something always got in the way. I thought I could weaken her shaman abilities by preventing her from practicing, but she was born with a defiant personality. Some spirit called Adena still managed to teach her about her abilities. Since there was no way for me to deal with the spirit, all I had to do was murder her and the temple would have been mine. Then *you* showed up!” Myra threw the energy ball at Yin, sending her further down the road. Myra prepared another attack as she approached Yin.

“You poked your nose everywhere it shouldn’t have been! All I had to do was kill Lily and I would have been able to do whatever I wanted to with you, but once again, a cub got in my way! But, even you couldn’t keep them both safe.” Myra taunted. Yin made no attempt to stand as she brought her fingers to her lips and let out a sharp whistle.

“Your tiger call?” Myra questioned before laughing. “Have you run out of hope already? What happened to all that confidence you had whenever you would threaten me? Are you just so shocked to see my true power? Allow me to give you another demonstration of how much stronger I am than you!” Myra released another arcane blast at Yin, sending her crashing through the wall of a building. She raised her paw and thin swirls of arcane energy to circle the building. When she closed her paw into a fist, the building collapsed.

Myra smiled as she walked through a large opening in a wall and glanced around at the wreckage when she heard a moan of pain. She approached Yin who had become trapped under a fallen support pillar and leaned against the wood that pinned her target. “It’s a good thing this part of town has been evacuated. Now no one will hear your cries for help. I’d love to stay here and watch you get crushed to death under that pillar, but I have some others to take care of before they become new problems. I’m certain that you’re no longer a threat to me, but just in case...” Myra held up a paw that became engulfed in flames as she pressed it against the pillar. When she pulled her paw away, fire continued to eat at the wood. She looked down and saw Yin’s white tiger pendant on the floor and picked it up. “Lily’s heart will be crushed when she finds out that you’re dead...if her heart is still beating anyway.” Myra snickered at Yin who growled back. “Oh, and don’t count on your tiger making it here. While I’ve been dealing with you, Bloodclaw should have finished him off by now.”

“You’ll never rule this territory.” Yin struggled to say through her pain. “Even if you take the crown by force, the citizens will never obey you when they

find out what you've done."

"Oh, I won't be taking the crown by force. Saraynea will give it to me. When Lily's death forces the entire territory into the paws of her inexperienced daughter, who I have captured, I'm sure I'll be able to convince her rather quickly to just hand over her crown. The citizens will be mad, but they won't be mad at me because they'll believe that the young princess was too weak and gave the territory to me instead. They'll release their hatred and anger at her while I rebuild the town. They'll see me as the hero of the territory and will welcome me as their new ruler!" Myra smiled before leaving behind the burning building with Yin's pendant in her paw.

Part 10

The den keepers rushed around, gathering tiger cubs and leading the others out of the dens to join the evacuation. The male tigers defended the dens from the controlled guards while the mothers assisted the keepers with gathering the cubs and placing them in baskets for a safe and fast travel.

“Where is Princess Lily’s tiger?” a keeper asked.

“Sunflare? I haven’t seen her.” Another answered.

“The princess won’t be happy if she finds out her tiger is missing. Maybe we should look around just in case she’s still here?”

“We have to go. Hopefully she was led out of here already.” The keepers finished and moved along with the others.

Stormfang observed the dens, sensing that something was wrong. He saw a guard approaching a cowering den keeper. With a swift strike of his tail, the guard was flung aside.

“It sure is nice to have a dragon around right now.” The keeper said before fleeing with the others. He turned his head to see the dens empty of the tigers and keepers, except for Frostfur who let out a few low roars at Stormfang. He nodded and lifted from the ground, quickly catching up to and staying near the keepers and tigers from the air.

Frostfur turned and trotted around the dens, inspecting them to make sure that they were empty when he heard a whistle. His head whipped around toward where he heard the call. Without further delay, he sprinted toward the path that led out of the dens. As he ran, a powerful force rammed into him.

He rolled on his side, his claws angrily lashing out. When he was able to stand, before him stood Bloodclaw with his own claws and fangs prepared for a

fight.

They growled at each other, but Frostfur turned toward the exit and sprinted again. Bloodclaw lunged and clawed at Frostfur's hind leg. Frostfur growled and turned only to swat at Bloodclaw's head to keep him away, but his opponent was eager for a fight and quick to do whatever he could to prevent Frostfur from heading to Yin. Enraged by the obstacle, Frostfur turned and the tigers roared, clawing and biting at each other in a ferocious frenzy.

Both tigers quickly became bloody and tired and backed away to catch their breath. One of Bloodclaw's ears was torn and an eye was tightly shut from the blood of a scratch on his forehead. Frostfur's pelt was marked with more scratches and a powerful swipe to his hind leg left deep wounds. Bloodclaw charged at Frostfur and pinned him down while holding a powerful bite to his neck. Frostfur tried to move, but his frantic claws were unable to shove the massive tiger off of him. A new roar was heard, and suddenly Bloodclaw released the grip on the white tiger's throat as he turned to deal with the new member of the fight. As Frostfur stood up, he saw Sunflare, with all her claws and fangs ready for a fight.

Sunflare viciously lashed out at the red tiger who was far larger than she was, though his size did not seem to intimidate her at all. Frostfur was surprised at how she did not hold back and lunged at the massive tiger. Bloodclaw seemed to try to get her to back away as he swiped and growled at her, but his delay to fight her only caused him to have more bloody scratches. When it seemed that he had snapped and no longer cared about harming the female, he lunged at her just as he had done to Frostfur.

The white tiger prepared to help her when she was pinned on her back, but stopped as Sunflare tucked in her hind legs and dragged them along Bloodclaw's underside. Bloodclaw leaned up and roared, allowing Sunflare to slash at his face before backing away. Bloodclaw took several wobbly steps back before

falling over. Frostfur panted as he watched his nemesis lay on his side, motionless.

Sunflare, whose coat had minimal damage and her bow was still perfectly tied, approached Frostfur and began to lick some of his wounds. His steps were shaky at first, but he forced himself to head toward the path out of the dens with Sunflare at his side.

Yin's claws left markings on the wood, but the pillar that trapped her was too heavy for her to move. The fire continued to spread throughout the building which moaned and cracked all around her. Through the blaze, she heard a loud roar.

"Frostfur!" she shrieked at the sight of her bloodied tiger. "Listen to me! You have to return to the temple and find Lily! Myra is much more dangerous than we thought!" she ordered, but Frostfur positioned himself under the pillar. Blood rushed from his wounds as he pushed against the pillar that held Yin down. "Frostfur, stop! You're making your injuries worse!" she cried, but it was obvious that for the first time since they had been partners, Frostfur completely ignored her words as he continued to push against the burning pillar. Yin saw another massive figure appear next to the pillar.

Armorscale placed his claws under the pillar and began to push it up. Achamaru carefully grabbed Yin and pulled her onto Frostfur's back.

"Are you ok? How did this happen?" Achamaru asked to Yin who was not even able to sit up straight.

"Myra...she's a mage. She has the young princess!" Yin struggled to say through her pain.

"Achamaru!" Mynh called as Shadowtalon landed. Behind them, Feleine and Longwei ran up to the group.

“When Mynh told us she saw smoke from the sky, we came as fast as we could!” Feleine eyed Yin and Frostfur. “Great Spirits! What happened to you?”

“Do you have enough energy to heal them?” Longwei asked Feleine.

“There’s no time for that. I’ll be fine.” Yin winced. “I have to get back to the temple.”

“Myra has Sara.” Achamaru informed the others.

“What!?” Feleine’s eyes widened with concern. “Do you know where they are?”

“Yes. Come on, Frostfur! We have to get to Myra’s study room!” Yin said. Despite his injuries, the tiger began to run toward the temple with the others close behind them.

Part 11

Earthfur tightly held Lily's paw between both of his own as she lay on the bed.

"How do you feel?" he asked. Lily smiled at him.

"Starting to feel better." She looked toward Kheiryn, who appeared relieved that her medicine was working. "I'm amazed that she even managed to find out which poisonous plants may have caused my illness."

"Oh, now this is a surprise." Everyone turned to the middle of the room where Myra stood. "I have to admit, I'm impressed by your skills, alchemist. If you'd like to work with me, I can put your skills to far better use than just medicines." Kheiryn's wings unraveled into tendrils which she stabbed through Myra who chuckled at the attack.

"A magic image." Ayumei said.

"You have no idea who you're dealing with!" Korramaru growled. "Just tell us where you're cowering like a cub and we'll gladly show you how strong we are!"

"Do you want to end up just like the last two who thought they were stronger than me?" Myra held up one of her paws. Hanging from her fingers were Saraynea's and Yin's necklaces. Lily's expression grew worried at the sight of the necklaces while everyone else glared at Myra's image. "Try to find me if you can. This is turning out to be much more fun than I thought." Myra smiled before the image faded away.

"We can't just sit around here anymore!" Huo growled.

"I agree." Lily slowly rose from the bed to her feet, no longer needing Earthfur's paw to help her stand. "We need to find the others as quickly as

possible and find out where Myra is hiding.”

“Are you sure you’re ready to get up and fight?” Earthfur asked.

“I’m the princess of this temple. It’s my fault that Myra has caused this much damage. I can’t wait any longer. I have to deal with her *now*.” Lily’s paws formed fists at her sides.

“If she has Sara, then we need a plan.” Korramaru said.

“I feel like my spirit guardian is close.” Lily said just before loud roars were heard along with the clashes of the guards weapons until the room and hallway were silent. Korramaru and Huo slowly leaned away from the door and opened it. On the other side of the doorway stood Hototo and Adena.

“Lily!” Adena rushed inside.

“Where is Saraynea?” Hototo asked.

“Can you sense her?” Korramaru asked.

“She is within the temple...but not with you?” his expression grew nervous.

“Myra has her, but at least we know she’s somewhere in the temple.” Ayumei said.

“She has Yin too.” Lily growled. “Myra has turned out to be a far greater threat than I thought. We should find the rest of your team.” Everyone nodded and left the room.

As they made their way toward the entrance of the temple, they met up with Feleine, Longwei, Achamaru, Mynh, Yin, and the tigers. Frostfur and Yin still appeared weak and in pain from their injuries.

“Yin! What happened to you?” Lily ran up to her friend.

“Myra happened.” Yin said. “I’m glad to see that you’re looking better.”

“Kheiryn was able to make some medicine to counter Lily’s symptoms.”

Huo said.

“Lily, you need to stay away from Myra.” Yin warned. “Let us handle her. She’s too dangerous.”

“What do you plan to do in your current condition?” Lily asked.

“I can fix them up.” Kheiryn walked up to Yin and began to heal her, her wings turning gold in the process.

“Besides,” Lily started, “I know that Myra is a mage. It’s because I’ve avoided fighting her that she was able to attack the temple, hurt you, and... now she has my daughter.”

“Sarayne was the one who found a hidden tunnel in Myra’s scroll room.” Yin said.

“We should head there.” Hototo said.

“Sara’s handled herself in a one-on-one fight before, but I’m sure she’d appreciate some back-up.” Korramaru said. Lily climbed onto Sunflare’s back and everyone followed Yin to Myra’s scroll room.

“Nice armor, Sis.” Ayumei said to Achamaru as they ran.

“Got a new sword too. They were a gift from Armorscale.” Achamaru explained.

As they headed through the temple, guards who regained their consciousness began to chase them. Once inside Myra’s scroll room, Korramaru, Achamaru, and Huo pressed themselves against the door. Frostfur and Sunflare faced the door, growling at it.

“Not this again!” Korramaru whined.

“At least this should be easier with Achamaru’s help.” Huo said.

“There’s something strange about this room.” Ayumei glanced around the

room.

“What do you mean?” Feleine asked. Ayumei continued to scan the room until her eyes settled on one of the shelves.

“This shelf is radiating with arcane energy.” Everyone turned to the shelf with curious expressions, but they soon became confused.

“Looks like an ordinary shelf to me.” Longwei said.

“For Ayumei to sense something from it, there must be a reason.” Kheiryn said. Ayumei raised one of her paws, purple energy swirling around it. Scrolls began to be pulled from the shelf and opened up as they floated in the air. One of them had strange, glowing patterns written on it.

“Well that certainly looks suspicious.” Mynh said.

“I think this is what’s controlling the temple guards.” Ayumei unrolled the scroll on a table until the whole pattern was shown. She, Yin, and Lily stood before it.

“What do we do with it?” Yin turned to Lily who had a determined look as she stared down at the scroll.

“I have no idea.” Lily said.

“Seriously?” Yin raised an eyebrow.

“It’s a mage rune, Yin! I’m a shaman!” Lily replied.

“Don’t shamans use runes too?” Yin asked.

“Shaman runes are written with elemental patterns and symbols.” Earthfur explained. “It’s like a different language compared to mage runes.”

These are very ancient symbols. Twilight whispered to Ayumei. *I may be a spirit, but mages first learned arcane skills from dark spirits.*

“Ok...” Ayumei started. Everyone turned to her. “With Twilight’s help I’ll

use a combination of mage and spirit writing to make a two-part rune: the first to nullify the effects of the control rune by forming a barrier around it to prevent it from reaching the guards and the second part will use the arcane residue trails to reach and purify the guards of the control spell.” Ayumei looked up and glanced around at everyone else in the room, all sharing the same baffled look on their faces. “I can fix the guards, but it will take some time.”

“We’ll hold the door for as long as we can.” Korramaru said.

“While she’s taking care of that, we should head down the tunnel. I bet Myra’s still down there and that’s where Saraynea is.” Yin said to Lily.

“Maybe some of us should stay here just in case the guards start to break the door?” Longwei asked.

“We do need to make sure that Ayumei isn’t interrupted.” Shadestep agreed.

“Meet up with us as soon as you can.” Lily said.

“We’ll head after you as soon we know that guards are ok.” Achamaru replied, and the others headed into the tunnel.

Myra stood near a wall of a large cavern, smiling as she watched Saraynea fight against both a fire and earth golem, their bodies covered in glowing markings. Saraynea’s fur dripped with sweat and her breathing was heavy from her fight, which started soon after Yin had been pushed through Myra’s portal.

“If only you could hit the runes on their backs.” Myra taunted as she stared at the backs of her golems, each with an arcane rune written that fed energy into the markings that covered their bodies. Saraynea ignored her and continued to focus on the targets that were actually fighting her.

She used her wind ability to push herself forward as she ran behind the rock golem, which was slow to turn its large and heavy body. As soon as she saw the rune of its back, she lunged to attack it, but the arm of the faster-moving fire golem punched her away. She stared at the fire golem and began to walk around

it, the golem also moving so that they continued to face each other. When the golem's back faced the wall of the cavern, Saraynea reached toward it and pulled her closed fist toward her, forcing a spike of earth from the wall to strike through the rune on its back. The fire golem began to dissipate until the last embers went out on the rock ground.

The large arms of the stone golem wrapped around Saraynea, tightly squeezing her as it walked toward Myra. Saraynea winced from the pain until she felt a rush of heat from behind the golem and was released from its arms. When her feet touched the ground, she turned and saw the golem slowly crumbling into a pile of rubble. Behind it stood Lily whose paws were surrounded by blue flames. Behind her stood Yin, Earthfur, Mynh, Feleine, Kheiryn, and the lion spirits.

"Mom! You're ok!" She greeted and hugged her mother, enjoying the warmth of her flame-covered paws on her back. She leaned away to stare at her mother's paws. "Your fire burns blue!?" she asked. Lily giggled at her reaction.

"Didn't expect your mother to have any cool abilities, did you?" Lily smirked.

"Well, I didn't think I'd see you again, Lily." Myra let out a low growl. Lily stepped toward the panda.

"I'm surprised that fire didn't hurt you." Feleine said in a low voice as she pressed a paw against Saraynea's back.

"Lily has excellent control over her abilities." Earthfur said. "She wouldn't accidentally hurt anyone that she wouldn't intend to." he finished.

"I've had enough of you, Myra!" Lily bared her fangs. "Your threat to my family, citizens, and territory ends *now*!"

"Oh really?" Myra smiled. "Do you think I'm intimidated because I'm outnumbered? You have no idea how what I can do!" Myra's paws became

surrounded by arcane energy. She pressed her paws to the ground and purple markings formed beneath them. As she stood back up, two rock golems rose before her. They were larger than the ones that had just fought with Saraynea, and each had four arms.

“Feleine, can you focus on keeping its attention?” Saraynea asked as one of the golems approached her and her and her friends.

“Of course.” Feleine replied.

“Kheiryn, if you can immobilize its arms and keep it still, then I can get behind it and destroy the rune.” Saraynea continued. “Mynh, aim at the magic markings on its body. Maybe cutting off the arcane flow will help slow it down.”

“This sounds like fun.” Kheiryn said as she unraveled her wings into tendrils.

“I’d like to see what else my shadow arrows can do.” Mynh readied a black arrow.

“Hototo, can you get onto its back?” Saraynea asked.

“Easily.” He replied and allowed Saraynea to climb onto his back. Saraynea glanced toward her parents, Adena, and Yin who were also preparing to fight the other golem.

As Saraynea planned, Feleine’s dodging skills agitated the slow moving golem, and its rage toward her forced it to focus its attention on the fast-moving monk. Kheiryn’s tendrils began to wrap around the golem’s arms while Mynh continued to strike it with her shadow arrows. Hototo’s powerful claws easily helped him to get Saraynea onto the golem’s back, where she grabbed the rocky surface with all her claws except for the one arm she was using to punch the rune, her fist surrounded with fire. Hototo continued to cling to the golem and wrestled with it.

Lily and her group glared at the second golem which was approaching

them. Without turning her head, she addressed Earthfur and Yin.

“Can you two handle this?” she asked.

“And what do you plan on doing while we fight this thing?” Yin asked.

“I’m going to take Adena and go right to Myra.” Lily growled. “If we keep focusing on her golems, everyone will begin to tire while she continues to just sit over there and watch.”

“Don’t worry. We can handle this.” Earthfur said and he summoned his spirit partner, Strongfeather to help with the fight. Lily and Adena began to step toward Myra.

“Want a golem all to yourself?” Myra smiled. “All you had to do was ask!” she pressed her paw against the floor and created a smaller rock golem, which rushed at her.

“Bring it down.” Lily said and Adena leaped at the golem, forcing it to stop where they collided. Adena’s paws erupted with fire and she dragged her claws through the rune on the golem’s back. Just as quickly as Myra created it, the golem crumbled. Myra’s smile slowly faded as Lily and Adena continued toward her.

“No matter how much magic you pour into your golems, their strength doesn’t even compare to a spirit.” Lily said. Myra growled at her as she approached. “You brag about your skills, yet you to hide behind your golems.” Lily’s paws became surrounded by blue fire. “Are you afraid to face the true power of the elements?” she taunted, earning her a snarl from Myra.

Saraynea continued to bash at the rune on her team’s golem. Her punches had created a hole in the rock. Inside, purple lines of arcane energy continued to glow and flow to the rest of the golem’s body.

“How’s that rune looking?” Feleine asked, still dodging the golem’s attacks.

“I’m trying to destroy it as fast as I can!” Saraynea called back. Hototo still clung to its body, and broke off one of the upper arms, which landed on the ground near Feleine. She glanced at it and noticed purple energy flowing from the broken end of the arm, which began to form patterns on its exterior. The arm began to reshape itself, forming a small version of the golem.

The smaller golem grabbed onto Feleine and held her still, allowing the larger one to slam her against the wall with one of its remaining arms. The small one climbed up the larger golem and broke off one of the arms that was restrained by Kheiryn’s tendrils. The broken arm remolded into another smaller golem, which traveled along the shadow tendrils until it leaped at Kheiryn. As she struggled to separate herself from it, the larger golem grabbed her and threw her into Mynh, sending both of them to the ground. Hototo jumped from the golem and began to claw at the arm that pinned Feleine against the wall. Saraynea pulled her arm back and landed a powerful blow to the hole in the golem’s back. Purple cracks formed along its body and it burst apart. The smaller golems that were once its arms also crumbled with the loss of their source of arcane energy. The force of the blast sent Saraynea to the ground, far from everyone else. Myra turned toward her and raised an arcane-engulfed paw.

“Get the young princess! Quickly!” Myra growled and the remaining golem turned from Yin and charged toward Saraynea with Earthfur trapped in one of its hands. Lily turned and rushed toward her daughter.

Earthfur struggled to get one of his paws free so he could force a large pillar of rock to rush from the ground and break one of the golem’s legs. The golem fell and freed Earthfur as it crashed against the ground. He and Saraynea leaned up on their front paws and looked up at the golem as it reached toward them. Lily pressed her paws against the ground to cover them in rock before using a burst of wind to propel her toward the golem. As she leaped at the golem, the rock on her paws turned into magma that extended from her claws. The magma blades sliced through the golem, leaving large chunks of motionless rock.

“You can control *lava*!?” Saraynea asked before turning to Earthfur. “Why didn’t you teach me anything like that?”

“If I knew how to manipulate lava, don’t you think I would have shown off by now?” Earthfur replied as he stared at his mate in awe. “I never even knew she could do that!”

“Myra isn’t the only one who has kept secrets.” Lily said as she and the mage glared at each other.

“So you can cut down my rock golems.” Myra snorted. “Fire moves faster anyway.” She reached her paws toward two sides of the cavern. Purple arcane energy moved along the walls, forcing open cracks which lava began to pour from. She created enough fire golems to distract everyone in the room except for Lily, who was eager to begin her duel with her.

Fire shed furiously from Lily’s molten paws as she slashed at Myra, who only focused on dodging. Saraynea and Earthfur had an easier time battling against the fire with their own elemental abilities while the others were forced to avoid the flames.

Kheiryn continued to step away from her golem, unsure of how to strike back. She reached with tendrils to strike at the fire, but it was much faster than the rock golems and was able to dodge her attacks. She reached with all her tendrils which wrapped around the wriggling fire. She scowled as her tendrils began to burn before she heard a loud roar nearby. A pair of blades cut through the fire, slicing the rune and forcing the golem to dissipate into small embers on the ground.

“What the heck is going on down here?” Korramaru glanced around the cavern.

“Myra keeps making these golems. They’re becoming quite frustrating since Lily is taking on Myra alone.” Kheiryn said.

“I guess we’ll just have to cut them all down then.” Korramaru smiled.

“You have to destroy the runes on their backs. That’s what’s controlling them.” Kheiryn explained.

“That doesn’t sound too hard.” Achamaru said as she and Ayumei stepped from behind Korramaru.

“I take it you were successful with the scroll?” Kheiryn asked.

“Huo and Longwei are still up there just to make sure that the guards are ok.” Ayumei smiled.

“Think you can get these golems to hold still long enough for us to break those runes?” Achamaru asked her sister.

“No problem!” Ayumei cheered. The sisters ran toward Feleine who was struggling against her golem without a weapon. Ayumei surrounded the golem with ice while Achamaru ran to circle behind it. The golem was able to weaken the ice and break free, but Achamaru was already prepared to strike its rune.

“I’m glad you guys finally made it.” Feleine panted.

“Let’s regroup and take these things down!” Korramaru said.

“How many times do you need to see your plans fail before you give up?” Lily said to Myra, who scanned the room and growled as one by one, her golems fell. She glared at Lily for a moment before a smile formed on her face.

“You survived the poison, freed the guards, and destroyed my golems, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still take this temple. How well do you think you’d be able to rule without your precious daughter?” Myra asked. Lily snarled and struck with her lava claws, one of them just cutting Myra’s cheek as she leaned away. Myra growled in response and glared back at Lily.

“I wonder how well you’d fight after seeing your daughter fall right before your eyes?” Lily’s expression filled with rage as she lunged to strike again, but

Myra suddenly vanished and her claws pierced the wall of the cavern. Lava poured from the holes that were formed as Lily leapt away from the wall. Her rage was replaced with horror as she turned toward where Saraynea was gasping after finishing off her fire golem. Myra stood behind her and formed a spear of arcane energy in her paw.

“Saraynea!” Lily shrieked. A portal opened in front of Saraynea, showing another cavern where lava poured from the walls. She looked over her shoulder just as Myra lunged toward her with her spear. Saraynea felt herself be shoved to the side and turned her head to see Yin. The panda stabbed her blades into Myra just as she was impaled by the arcane spear, and both of them fell into the portal. Hototo watched Saraynea rush into the portal and began to run toward it as well. He jumped into the portal which closed immediately after.

“Please tell me you can make a portal to wherever they went!” Feleine asked to Ayumei.

“I’d have to trace the arcane residue between the portals, but I’ve never done that before.” Ayumei nervously replied. Lily pressed her paws against the cavern wall.

“They must still be somewhere in the volcano.” She said. “We have to find them!”

“It won’t be easy to sense the interior of the volcano with all the lava moving around.” Earthfur said as he pressed his paws against a wall as well.

“I’ll see if I can trace where Myra’s exit portal is.” Ayumei said and ran to where the portal had opened.

Yin placed a paw over the spear wound on her abdomen. She growled from the pain as she leaned up from lying on her back. She looked around and saw that they were in another room where lava poured from the walls and continued to flow through holes in the ground. Beside her were her daggers while Myra

stood further away, pressing fiery paws against her own stab wounds to close them. She took a moment to breathe after sealing her wounds before she growled and walked up to Yin.

“As much as I want to kill you right now,” Myra started as she approached Yin, “I like my original idea of keeping you as my personal slave for when I take the temple. That way, I can constantly remind you how you failed to protect Lily and her daughter!” She began to stomp on Yin’s wound, making the panda groan in pain at each impact. A loud roar startled Myra, forcing her to back away from Yin. Hototo growled at her while she continued to back away. Saraynea leaned down beside Yin.

“You would’ve been a lot safer if you stayed behind.” Yin said.

“So would you.” Saraynea replied. “I’ll finish this quickly so we can get you to a healer.” Saraynea stood and saw Hototo and Myra glaring at each other.

“Looks like I need to adjust my plans again.” Myra said.

“You don’t seriously think you can still take the temple, do you?” Saraynea growled.

“Even I don’t think I can convince Lily to give up her crown anymore. There are too many others standing in my way now.” Myra replied.

“So you finally accept your defeat?” Saraynea asked.

“I guess, but if I’m going to be defeated, there’s at least one more thing I’d like to take care of.” Myra smiled. “If I can’t rule this temple, then I want to make sure that Lily suffers every single day she continues to live!” Myra reached a paw toward Saraynea. Hototo lunged toward Myra, pinning her against the rock wall while biting down on her shoulder. Saraynea noticed purple cracks forming on the ground beneath her feet. Hototo’s ears twitched to the sound of the crumbling ground and he turned just as Saraynea fell through the hole.

Hototo released his grip on Myra and jumped toward Saraynea without

hesitation. She grabbed his paws and he pulled her close to his body as they fell toward a pool of lava.

“Why’d you jump!?” Saraynea asked.

“You’re my partner. I’m supposed to always protect you.” He answered.

“But, I don’t know how to control lava! We can’t survive this fall!”

“After everything Myra has already gotten away with, I will not allow her to succeed in defeating you!” Hototo growled and a bright golden aura formed around them. The gold shell remained around them as they fell into the lava pool.

“How did you do that?” Saraynea asked in shock.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been able to do anything like this before.” Hototo said as he examined the gold shell too.

“Well, you are a guardian *and* light spirit. You’ve never been able to use light abilities before?” Saraynea asked. Hototo shook his head, but Saraynea still smiled at him. “Good time to learn how to unleash it. You think we can get back up there and save this temple from Myra? I’m curious about what else you can do with this light energy!” she said.

“Let’s finish this.” Hototo nodded.

Myra slowly made her way toward the hole she had formed, holding her bloody shoulder with her other paw. She stepped backward when a pillar of light erupted from the hole. Hototo slammed on the ground before her and spread a pair of gold wings that sparked with light element electricity. Saraynea jumped off his back, her paws surrounded with her own gold energy. Myra looked at them in shock and took a step back.

“You just refuse to die.” Myra snarled. Hototo and Saraynea growled back. “What do you plan to do after this? You think you can handle being a princess?”

And don't forget, you're still a half-breed. You've worked so hard to protect a territory that won't even want you for a leader." Myra said. Hototo let out a loud roar, sending bright strands of light electricity at her and forcing her against the wall, knocking her out from the impact. Saraynea's eyes filled with tears as she glared at Myra. The lightning around her paws began to wildly dance before she threw the energy at Myra. The force was enough to break part of the wall and the ground where Myra sat, leaving only a large hole where she had been.

Hototo's wings receded into his back and Saraynea's lightning returned to its normal blue color. A portal suddenly opened behind them and Saraynea and Hototo turned and prepared to fight again when Ayumei stepped out.

"Sara? Is it safe?" Ayumei asked.

"Yeah. Myra won't be a problem anymore." Saraynea replied. Ayumei stepped aside and Lily walked through the portal, soon followed by the others.

"Saraynea! Are you ok?" Lily tightly hugged her daughter.

"I'm fine. Yin is hurt though." Saraynea turned toward Yin who continued to lie on her back. Lily's eyes widened and she ran to kneel beside her friend.

"I need to get her to the garden immediately." Lily said. "Ayumei, can you make a portal to get us there?" she asked as she and Saraynea pulled Yin onto Hototo's back.

"Sure!" Ayumei said and held up an arcane covered paw to her portal. The image of the first cavern shimmered until it was replaced by the garden and everyone stepped through.

Lily knelt by the edge of the garden pond while Yin was carefully placed beside her. Lily placed her paw in the water and as she moved it over Yin's wound, a trail of water followed and flowed into the injury.

"I was starting to think that I'd bleed to death down there." Yin weakly said without opening her eyes.

“That wouldn’t have been a concern if you hadn’t gotten yourself stabbed!” Lily scolded. Yin smiled and softly chuckled.

“I probably wouldn’t have made it if your daughter didn’t jump in after me.” Yin said.

“Which was also a terribly dangerous idea!” Lily turned to Saraynea, whose ears flattened in shock. “You shouldn’t have gone in there by yourself!”

“I didn’t know how long the portal would be open for.” Saraynea said. “I couldn’t just stand there after she saved me.”

“Why are you so upset?” Yin chuckled. “Everything is fine now. Myra can’t hurt anyone or threaten the temple again.”

“My best friend and daughter ran through a portal with someone whose goal was to murder you both!” Lily looked back down and Yin who slightly opened her eyes and continued to smile at her friend. “I thought I was going to lose both of you! It’s a little hard for me to calm down right now!”

“Besides, Hototo was with me.” Saraynea turned to her spirit. “What happened to all the light energy you were giving off?”

“Light energy?” Korramaru asked.

“That sounds new.” Achamaru added.

“When did that happen?” Mynh asked.

“He just suddenly sprouted light wings that were covered with gold electricity.” Saraynea explained. “When that happened, my own lighting turned gold too.”

“That is called a spirit’s *fury* mode.” Earthfur started.

“When spirits get worked up, their elemental powers can strengthen significantly.” Strongfeather continued to explain. “But this is usually temporary

and spirits return to normal when that extra power is no longer needed. His fury power probably enhanced your own skills since you're partners."

"That explains why my lightning turned yellow like light energy." Saraynea said.

"You were able to summon your fury skills?" Adena asked to Hototo.
"That's very impressive."

"They're all tougher than they look." Yin said as she and Lily stood up.
"Much better." She said as she rubbed where her stab wound had been.

"Are you sure you should stand?" Saraynea asked.

"She'll be fine." Lily reassured her. "I used water to heal her."

"Your fire is blue, you can fight with lava *and* you can heal?" Saraynea asked excitedly to her mother. Lily smiled and nodded. "That is so awesome!" Saraynea cheered. "*Please*, you have to teach me how to do those things!"

"You did hope that she'd turn out to be a shaman so you could train her." Yin gently nudged her elbow into Lily's arm.

"Of course I'll train you." Lily said and Saraynea tightly hugged her. "But, there are some things we need to take care of first. The citizens are still hiding in the valley and the guards are still recovering. Once everyone has settled down from this ordeal, I can finally announce that my mate and daughter have returned." She smiled.

"We'd better get started then." Yin said. "There's a lot to do to recover from the mess Myra caused." She began to head back toward the town, everyone else soon following her. "Oh! I almost forgot!" Yin reached into one of her pockets and handed Saraynea's necklace to her.

"My necklace! I thought I'd lost it for good." Saraynea tightly held the gem in her paws.

“I managed to get them from Myra right before we fell through the portal.” Yin and Saraynea tied their necklaces around their necks as they continued toward the town.

“So,” Huo said, causing everyone to turn to him as they walked, “I never knew when a good time to talk about this would have been since so much was going on and all, but Saraynea is my mate.” He finished.

“I didn’t know you two were mates!” Lily said excitedly.

“Yeah, I couldn’t think of a good time to tell her either.” Yin said.

“You knew!? We must hold a ceremony for them!”

“I’m just glad that we get to stay together.” Huo said relieved.

“We can learn how to be royals together.” Saraynea smiled at him.

Part 12

Saraynea stood before a tall mirror, staring at her reflection. She wore a new dress and her injuries from her battle with Myra had been healed. She sighed with a worried expression on her face as she looked away from the mirror.

“I thought you’d be excited for when you could finally stop hiding in this temple.” Lily approached her from behind. “You look upset. What’s wrong?” she asked. Saraynea looked back to the mirror and stared at her mother’s reflection.

“What if...they don’t like me?” Saraynea looked down.

“Why would you think your citizens won’t like you?”

“What will they think when they realize that their princess is a half-breed?” Saraynea’s ears flattened.

“Don’t worry about that. They’ll like you.” Lily stepped close to her and began to lick one of her daughter’s ears to comfort her.

“Even if they do, what if I’m not a good leader? I don’t want to hurt your territory.”

“Saraynea, you and your friends just saved my life and this territory. I’m sure that they’ll like you. Now, come on. Everyone’s waiting.” Lily led Saraynea down the hallway and up to two large doors. “Don’t be nervous. Your friends will be there too.” Lily smiled at her. As two guards began to open the doors, Saraynea took a deep breath before following her mother outside to the balcony.

As soon as her mother reached the edge, Saraynea heard that massive crowd below cheer until Lily raised a paw to silence them.

“My citizens,” Lily started, “During the last few days, we have been

recovering from what had been a betrayal of my advisor, Myra. She will never again threaten this territory and the guards who sided with her have already been brought to the prison. The traitors might have succeeded if not for the help of a group of strangers who arrived only days before Myra put her plans into action. This team has decided to stay here to help protect this territory.”

Lily paused and looked over her shoulder. Saraynea turned as well and saw Feleine, Mynh, Achamaru, Ayumei, Korramaru, and Kheiryn step onto the balcony in their usual clothing which had been repaired. “Each member of this team has specialized in a certain style of fighting. Together, they form a powerful unit that will be known as the Elites. Their skills will be used to enhance the security of the temple, town, and the entire territory of the FrostPeak Mountains!” the crowd let out a loud cheer in response. Lily allowed them a moment to celebrate the news before she raised her paw again. “But they’re not the only reason to celebrate. Among this team were two other very important members.”

Saraynea took a deep breath as she realized that she would be mentioned soon. “After years of being separated, my mate, Earthfur, has returned to help me lead as your king.” Lily looked over her shoulder to motion for Earthfur to step out and stand beside her, prompting the crowd to cheer again. “Along with my mate,” Lily started and the crowd quieted to listen, “This team also had someone else with them; someone who was stolen from us years ago: my daughter and your princess, Saraynea! Today we celebrate the reuniting of the royal family!”

As soon as Lily finished, several fireworks were launched into the air that filled the sky with bright, beautiful colors. Lily turned toward Saraynea who smiled back.

“I told you they’d like you.” She said and walked back inside the temple.

“I didn’t know you guys were being made into a special team.” Saraynea

said to Feleine.

“Your mother was so impressed with how we fought to save the temple that she wanted us to stay and keep the territory even safer than before.” Feleine said.

“I’m glad you’ll all still be close.” Saraynea said. “Sometimes I was worried about how me being a princess would affect the team.”

“If I may have your attention.” Lily said and Saraynea and the Elites turned to her. “A guard named Mudhide reported a camp of bandits in the forest outside the town. I fear that with the townspeople distracted by the celebration that the bandits may try to sneak in. I’d like for the Elites to head out there and make sure no one tries to cause any mischief. Another named Stormcloud stayed near their camp to keep an eye on them.”

“Forest bandits? We should be able to handle them and be back in time to enjoy the celebration.” Korramaru smiled.

“It’s so exciting to have our first mission!” Ayumei said. “We’ll teach those guys what happens when they wander too close to the town!” Saraynea smiled at Ayumei’s enthusiasm, but her ears dropped and smile faded at the thought of not being able to help her friends.

“Princess Saraynea.” Snowflower greeted. Saraynea turned to her and saw her old outfit folded in her arms.

“You’re certainly not going on missions in your dress.” Lily said.

“I get to go with them? Even though I’m the princess?” Saraynea asked. Lily giggled before she replied.

“They may be the Elites, but they’ll still need a leader. I saw how well you know their skills and used them during our fight with those massive rock golems. Being a princess doesn’t mean sitting in a temple all day; it means doing what needs to be done to keep the territory safe.” Lily said.

“We’ll make sure those bandits don’t hurt anyone!” Saraynea said as she took her clothes from Snowflower and changed into them before meeting the others on the side of the temple. Snowflurry pat Stormfang’s neck while Korramaru made sure his saddle was secure. “Everyone’s ready?” Saraynea asked.

“Ready when you are.” Mynh replied and the others nodded.

“So, now that all the chaos is over,” Feleine started as they ran toward the entrance of the town, “How do you feel about being a princess?”

“We just saved a temple!” Saraynea cheered excitedly. “And we get to go on more adventures that will help keep our home safe. I think I can handle being a princess.” She smiled.