

The dirt road winded and weaved, a lazy river of earth ahead of the trio. The waning light casting a hue warm but dim against them but bright enough to see ahead. The gentle chime of bells accompanied them as they walked lazily down the road. A soothing musical charm and lovely mood lighting. It made Long Xiang feel like he was in a romantic movie with The Guardian by his side and their ward prancing ahead of them with her own bell singing merrily along with her. The happiness he felt almost made him forget how uncomfortably hot the day was. *Almost.*

“What kind of rides do you think they will have?” Xiu Xinyi called back to them, turning around to walk backwards. “I hope they have a ferris wheel. It wouldn’t feel right if they didn’t.”

“Possibly.” Xiang replied. “I myself am wondering what foods will be offered. I can taste the deep fried sweets already.” Xiang purred at the thought, the taste of powdered sugar over a honeyed fried bread dancing on his tongue. “Or what kind of games they will have, as *rigged* as they are.”

“You’re just sour over the last festival.” An Ling, the silver bell out of the trio inhabiting The Guardian, teased with a sly smile. “Where is your sense of competition now, huh? Luck not so lucky over throwing a ball?”

Long Xing playfully snapped his teeth at An Ling who pranced just out of reach with a laugh. “I will show you ‘not lucky’!”

“Bullying!” A bright barking laughter escaped An Ling and he danced away from Long Xiang who was jokingly lunging at the jade CCCat. “You see this A-Xin? He is bullying this poor An Ling! A beast set upon me!”

Xiu Xinyi laughed and bounded over to them. She pounced on top of Long Xiang and bit lightly onto his ear. The size difference between Xinyi and Xiang made her comically small hanging there on his back. A house cat trying to take down a full grown tiger.

“I will rescue you A-Ling!” She pronounced heroically, although very muffled by the ear in her mouth.

“*AH* Defeated by the noble maiden I am!” He dramatically cried and slowly fell onto the road careful to not land or throw off the much smaller CCCat. Another round of laughter spilled around him.

“My hero.” An Ling chuckled. They came over and rubbed their face against Xiu Xinyi, which made her dislodge from Xiang’s ear. Then they moved to rub their head onto Xiang’s with a rolling purr. Their tongue went around and held his face affectionately. Xiang reciprocated the gesture. Xinyi fake gagged at the action, quickly hopping off of Xiang as if he was on fire. She ran ahead once more all the while shouting: “*Ew ew EW.*”

Long Xiang and An Ling watched her for a bit while cuddling before getting up to follow her. For a young adult she sure acts like a much younger teenager about her sudo-parents show of affections. It made Xiang shake his head with a small chuckle as they carried on the curving dirt road.

It did not take long on the meandering road to see the first hints of the fair . . . but not in the way he expected. Some rides were up for sure but not all the way put together. Most of the

padded down area was still empty or filled with odds and ends that were supposedly meant to become stalls. Even the banner for the entrance was laid limp on the ground. The closer the group got the more it became apparent that the fair was not even close to being set up for the **‘Tonight Only’** special. Xiu Xinyi had stopped hard in the road near the entrance. Hard enough she caused a divot where the dirt gave way to her hands and legs. Her bell gave an almost comically sad sounding dull tink where she sat.

“*What?*” Her voice was a small and devastated whisper. While Xiang was disappointed in the lack of preparation for the carnival, the heartbreak Xinyi was exuding made him upset. The bell around The Guardian’s neck shifted hue, a magical spell upon it to tell the shifting of personalities within the jade CCCat to match the bell eyes. Subtle tell for those who knew. Silver turned to Rose Gold. An Ling to An Ning. Their body shifted and the solid stone seemed softer in countenance.

“Ease A-Xin.” Their voice was sweet and gentle, his bigger body curling around her. “We must be earlier than they expected us to be.”

Xiu Xinyi nodded her head, oddly quiet and small. She curled more into An Ning. The disappointment was tangible between the three. He could practically taste the sour note it left in the air. Long Xiang shook his body trying to physically calm down the rising anger and disappointment. It would not help any situation for him to get angry. His anger was historically and infamously explosive.

“And how long will that be?” Xiang grouched, his tail thwapping onto the ground hard. “It’s not like they specified what time other than tonight! Poor planning on this level is entirely unprofessional.”

“It is.” An Ning gently acknowledged without sounding condescending. Xiang’s rising hackles lowered. An Ning had that effect he supposed. “Getting mad at the workers trying their best will get us nowhere. This was most likely not their decision but their bosses. They are just as frenzied as we are disappointed. Why don’t we either go to the nearby town? Or see if we can help out?”

“I suppose we could help out.” Xinyi mumbled, finally pulling herself away from An Ning. She gave an unsure smile to Long Xiang. “Maybe someone needs a taste tester?”

“If we must. The call of action is to be held and all that.” Xiang drew out his words as if it was some big thing he had to do while placing his hand on his chest for effect. As if he was an aggrieved noble being told to do his job for once. That pulled a giggle from Xiu Xinyi who was now looking much more like herself. “Off we go. Might as well be useful. Idle hands and such.”

Xiu Xinyi fully left the comfort of The Guardian and padded towards some Skires working nearby. The more she walked away, the more pep in her step returned. The sight fully eased the tension in Xiang’s chest. An Ning rubbed against Long Xiang, a gentle purr above the chime of their bell. The bell in question changed color again as they walked away. Rose Gold to Gold. An Ning to An Qing. Of course An Qing would come to the front when there was tough work and organizing to do.

Strict that one.

Xiang made sure to give a kiss to the jade CCCat as he joined them walking. After all, he loved The Guardian. Each personality is just as loveable and just and worthy of affection. Even mean An Qing. Actually especially An Qing. There was a reason the Temple ran as efficiently as it did and it was definitely not Long Xiang's or Xiu Xinyi's doing.

Hard work was surely going to be rewarded with play later, Long Xiang reminded himself.