Ninja Wizard Book 3

by mad_fairy

Summary

Harry has made his gatemaker, he's acquired a bit of extra time, and he has a plan. Now, it's time for an adventure in another world.

Notes

Moving right along, aren't we?

As always, comments and kudos are appreciated. Enjoy, book three of my ongoing saga of Harry the dimensional traveler--here's where the series actually earns its name.
“Well…here goes nothing…” Harry murmured while taking a deep breath and gazing down at the contraption he held in his hand.

The contraption—Harry had named it ‘the gate maker’, represented months of hard work—after picking Tom Riddle’s brain for a couple of weeks, he’d gotten to work building the thing. It was finally done, and today was the test run.

If it worked, he’d be having himself a little adventure in another world, where he could hopefully use his ninja skills in actual combat and have a bit of excitement.

If it didn’t work at all, well, he’d be heading back to the Dursleys for a week and then summer with Sirius and Adeline as per usual.

If it sort of worked…well…he would be trapped in another world and unable to return, and would never see his friends and family again, and they’d never know what happened to him.

There was a reason Harry’s hands were shaking and he was having a sudden bout of self-doubt and secondthoughts.

Worried or not, he was still going through with it.

He loved Sirius, he’d become fond of Adeline. He’d miss Remus, Barty and even Dora. He’d miss his friends, and school…. But he was still going; even though the consequences could well be dire should anything go amiss.

Having magic powers and ninja skills, the ability to fly and teleport, and being unable to use any of it ever, was slowly driving him mad.

He felt trapped, like he was suffocating, and slowly dying by inches.

There were days, when the sky was blue and the weather was fine when he wanted nothing more to just hop on his broom and get lost in the sky for hours…but he couldn’t, because a muggle might see, and that was against the law.

He had to be ‘normal’ by Dursley standards when he was with them, and was mostly in the house when he was with Sirius—they would let him outside without an escort, as they all seemed to think he was going to be attacked if he did. Telling them he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself did no good.

Everyone in the wizarding world was so used to living under the shackles of secrecy, they had internalized it to such a degree that their very spirit was compromised—it sounded dramatic, put that way, but it was true.

Wizards tended to stay in the house—there wasn’t really much to do on an average day beyond hang out at the pub for a bit, or go see a quidditch game anyway. When they did go out, they scurried from place to place, and worried the whole time about muggles—which most found to be stressful, so they didn’t do it much.

Even when doing ‘unobtrusive’ magic, you got slammed.

He and some of his friends from school had done a summer solstice dance at Sirius and Adeline’s
wedding; there had been enough people there that, when it really got going, it had sucked in the
townsfolk nearby and led to an all-night dancing party. The Ministry had come down so hard on
everyone involved that many were still stinging from the fines. The muggles of the town, all two
hundred and fifty of them, had been obliviated, and the dances had later been made illegal.

Anyone found violating the law would be fined, and possibly serve a jail sentence for secrecy
violations if any muggles were swept up.

He and his friends who’d been at the wedding had practically spent the summer as prisoners,
confined to their homes, but for a few (very brief) outings.

He gone from there right back to school where you were either in class or your common room, and
the weather got cold enough that going outside started to become a chore.

Then, last summer, on top of the debacle with the wedding, he’d been grounded for three weeks for
being 'cheeky'. It had all become too much—like the walls were closing in on him, and there was no
freedom to be found anywhere.

It was this unhappy state of affairs that had led to his current mad scheme.

He had been told, several times and by several people, that Tom Riddle had been an incredible
wizard—brilliant, a prodigy, a guy who could just ‘do stuff’ other people couldn’t.

He had used the picture he’d made—an externalization of his connection to Voldemort—to pick the
man’s brain. He’d ‘nudged’ a bit, to get him thinking on the possibility of travelling to other worlds.

Much to Harry’s delight, he’d gotten working on the problem.

Then, after a couple of weeks of poking at the idea, he’d come up with a way to do it.
The ‘gate maker’ in his hands was the finished result of Tom Riddle’s work; Harry just hoped he’d
made it correctly and didn’t forget anything.

He was currently in the Chamber of Secrets, with Hedwig by his side watching him impatiently.

It was September 1st.

Right now, upstairs in the great hall, Harry was also sitting with his friends at the Gryffindor table,
enjoying the opening feast of the new school year. How could that be, you wonder?

It was really very simple.

For some unfathomable reason, Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, had arranged for
Hermione Granger, resident know-it-all and general annoyance, to be given the power to bend space
and time so she could take every class Hogwarts offered.

The device was called a time-turner, and Harry had discovered she had the thing quite by accident.
Once he’d discovered it though, he realized he’d found the perfect way to ‘slip off’ for an adventure
with no one the wiser.

With some luck and some ingenuity, he had made a (non-magical) copy of the thing and swapped it
with the real one just before Hermione had turned it in to Professor McGonagall at the end of the
year. Once he had it in hand he had slipped off by himself and set the thing to turning, until he’d
zipped back a whole year. He had actually watched himself and his friends heading into the great
hall before slipping off to the Chamber of Secrets.
He now had a year to go adventuring with no one the wiser.

He had done what he could to make his trip as pleasant as possible. He had a tent, he had medical supplies, he had books, he had food (under preservation charms), his broom and a small magic carpet, he had his wand, (as well as a workable spare he’d found while poking through his vaults) he had swords, he had daggers, and he had his trusty Hedwig, who’d insisted on coming along.

He was as ready as he was going to be…all that was left was to see if the gate maker even worked.

Hands shaking, and with a stomach full of butterflies, he held the thing in front of him and pushed the shining green button.

A high-pitched whine began to sound from the device and a beam of light shot from the front end. The air in front of him rippled and then began to twist in on itself, faster and faster until it formed a small spinning knot. The knot pulsed and then widened until a portal opened up in front of them.

Hedwig squawked and flew to Harry’s shoulder, where she bristled and glared at the doorway suspiciously.

“Ready, girl?” Harry asked quietly.

Hedwig’s claws tightened on Harry’s shoulder and she gave the little half-bow that served her as a nod of agreement.

“Let’s go then…next step, adventure!”

Steeling his courage, Harry stepped through the portal, which shut behind him.
Harry's first day in his new world.

Harry had but a moment to look around and gape at the empty, icy, not to mention bitterly cold, arctic landscape surrounding him, when the portal closed behind him. He pulled out his tent, which was stowed in the pouch at his waist, with hands already gone numb, and unrolled it, before tapping it with his wand to make it inflate.

Half-frozen and still somewhat disoriented, he crawled inside, Hedwig right behind him. He managed to get a fire started in the fireplace, and then curled into a ball nearby to let it start doing its work. Once the worst of his shivers stopped, he slowly uncurled, and then stumbled to the kitchen to make some tea, or maybe heat up some soup—it hardly mattered, so long as it was hot.

While that was heating, he popped out a juicy mouse from one of the scrolls in the kitchen cabinet, enervated it and set it loose for Hedwig. Bred for cold weather or not, he imagined it was a bit cold even for her; she’d need the extra food and warmth as much as he did.

Once he felt marginally thawed, he dug out his trunk and dug out his winter gear. He really should have kept something of the sort near to hand, but it had been just turning summer when he’d left; it had never occurred to him that he would stumble into an arctic wasteland.

Once dressed in a couple of warm layers, with his fur-lined boots on his feet, and his fur-lined cloak and gloves within easy reach, he sighed.

"Nothing is ever easy, is it?"

Nearby, Hedwig looked up from the remains of her mouse and clacked her beak, as though to say she completely agreed. Harry grinned at her, and then crept towards the opening of the tent, shivering in the frigid air that was creeping in from there, and peered outside. He was not looking forward to going back out there, but at the same time, they could hardly just stay here either. There was nothing to be seen, as far as he looked, but ice, snow, and more of the same.

“You just about done there, girl? No, don’t rush. I still need to clean my dishes and all. Once we’re both finished though."

Hedwig got to work on finishing up the last of her mouse.

It took some doing to pack up the tent once they were ready to go; in the short time he’d been in there, the bottom had frozen stiff. He had to thaw it and dry it before packing it away. He was liking this place less and less the longer he was here. All he could say was thank goodness for magic; he’d have been in real trouble otherwise. Finally, he drew his broom and mounted it, before seeking Hedwig, who was flying overhead.

“I think we’d better both take to the air for a bit, and see what’s around, if anything, don’t you think, girl?”
Hedwig clacked her beak a few times, and flew closer as he rose in the air.

“Man, I think we really are at one of the poles…or Norway…or whatever the equivalent is here in this world. I hope we can find some Eskimos or something…and I hope they’re friendly. I also hope Voldemort’s calculations were correct and this is a world of magic, or we might end up having to obliviate the Eskimos even if we find them…oh, well, nothing for it but to start searching. If I remember correctly, sunlight doesn’t last long at extreme latitudes…we need to move quickly; we’ve no real idea how much longer the daylight will last.”

Hedwig landed on the broom handle in front of him, clacked her beak and waved one of her wings imperiously.

“There are people here? That way? Let’s go!”

Hedwig launched herself in the direction indicated and Harry followed after.

He almost missed the village, even though he knew it was there.

It wasn’t much—a wall of snow encircling a small number of igloos. There weren’t very many people either—a handful of women (mothers and grandmothers), and a handful of small children. The children were pointing up at them with delight and wonder—but no horrified disbelief, which he took as a good sign.

“You there! Airbender! Come down and stand on the ground like a decent person! I’m too old to stand around gaping at the sky!” The oldest woman down there called out imperiously, before shooing the children and the other women back to what they had been doing.

Harry shrugged and flew into the village to land in front of the old woman who looked him up and down suspiciously.

“You’re an odd looking airbender…though I suppose if your people have just been in hiding, and not wiped out like everyone thought, it probably would be wise to forgo the baldness, the tattoos and the orange and yellow clothing---I don’t know how I feel about you running around in water tribe colors though…”

Harry glanced down at his blue cloak with its silvery-grey fur, and then at the woman and the rest of the villagers—they were all in blue and white, though the old woman in front of him had some purple as well.

“I mean no offense” he was quick to assure her. “I seem to have taken a wrong turn somewhere, and this was the only warm clothing I had to hand. Could you tell me where I am?”

The old woman gave him another suspicious glare. “How could you not know? You’re at the south pole, home of the Southern Water Tribe!”

“I’m not from around here.”

The old woman was taking in the details of his clothing, his face, eyes and hair, the frown on her face growing more and more pronounced.

“You really don’t look like anyone I’ve ever seen…though granted, your people have been gone a long time…green eyes. Have you been hiding in the earth kingdom then?”
Harry debated with himself on what to say, and then decided to go for broke—this was a small village at the South Pole—how many people could she really tell if she took it badly?

“I’m not from this world. I’m a traveler. I’ve never been to the earth kingdom, and I actually have no idea what an airbender is or why it’s important.”

“Not from this world? Are you a spirit then? Are you the avatar?”

“I’m not a spirit, I’m just a boy. Avatar of what?”

“What do you mean of what? The avatar! Master of the four elements!”

“Well, that helps…but the word ‘avatar’ implies that one is a vessel of an otherworldly power—be it demon or god—that allows it to interact with the mortal plane. So, some elemental kami of some sort? You said you were the water tribe…do you have some sort of water-based powers?”

“How could you not know…what sort of world did you come from?”

“Well, from what I can see around here, one that’s not so very different from your own. We have people in my world who live among the snow and ice near the poles…I can’t imagine their villages look so very different from what you have here. I can’t speak for the rest of the world as I haven’t seen it yet. This was where my portal let me…. out.”

Harry trailed off as the hair on the back of his neck began to prickle. He turned in a slow circle, trying to locate the source.

“What? What is it?”

“I don’t know…what is that? Wait…there! What’s that light?”

A white light was shining some distance from the village. It shot into the sky, forming a pillar of white that reached for the heavens, and then stopped, just as quickly.

“I don’t know” the old woman answered quietly.

“Visitors from other worlds and strange lights in the sky. Tui and La, watch over your children. I fear a new chapter in our decades of war has just opened” She cast a troubled glance at Harry, her eyes grim. “Though for good or ill, I couldn’t say.”

The old woman, whose name was Kanna, took Harry into her igloo and offered him something to eat. While he ate—some sort of odd fish, with a bit of seaweed for flavor—she filled him in a bit on the world he’d found himself in.

Four nations, four peoples, four elemental powers, which they called ‘bending’, and one avatar of the spirit of the earth, who could master all four elements and was entrusted to keep the balance. The only problem was, the avatar had disappeared a hundred years ago, the air nomads had been wiped out, and since then it had been a hundred years of war against the fire nation.

The tiny little village he found himself in used to be much larger—but raids to wipe out the water benders, and all the men leaving to fight the fire nation had led to what he saw now.

Kanna had lost her daughter to raiders, her son-in-law to the war, and was left, with the help of her
two grandchildren to keep what was left of their village together.

Well, he’d wanted someplace to use his ninja skills—a world at war for a hundred years would certainly fit the bill.

“You seem distracted. Is something wrong?”

“My grandson Sokka and my granddaughter Katara went out earlier to fish. Normally they would have returned by now.”

“Would they have gone far?”

“Not so far that they couldn’t have returned before nightfall. There are sometimes treacherous currents caused by the ice shifting. I fear they may have run afoul of such, or they’d be back by now.”

“Would you like me to look for them? If they did have an accident, they could just be trapped on some ice somewhere.”

“I was going to ask you to.” Kanna admitted.

“Sure. Do you know which way they headed so I can at least start searching in the right direction?”

Kanna led him outside and pointed.

“From what I saw of the surrounding area when I arrived, if they were heading that way they probably ended up in the path of that bright light we saw earlier.”

“Indeed. Please find them, or at least retrieve their bodies young man.”

Harry thought she was being rather grim, but then folks living in such a place had to be accepting of the realities of life, he supposed.

“I’ll return shortly.” Was all he said. He whistled for Hedwig who finished off the fish one of the children had given her and flew to his shoulder.

“Can you find Sokka and Katara?”

Hedwig swiveled her head and then pointed with one of her wings in the general direction of where the light had been earlier.

“They’re still alive, it seems. I’ll go get them.”

“Many thanks. I’ll make sure there’s food waiting when you all return.”

“Lead the way, Hedwig.” Harry told the owl as he mounted his broom.

They had been flying for a while, when Harry spotted an odd sight. There was some sort of a massive hairy beast floating in the water down below.

There was a large saddle on its back, which held two teenagers dressed like the folks in Kanna’s
village—probably the missing grandchildren, as they were the first people either of them had seen since they’d set out. On the beast’s head was a slightly younger boy—one with a bald head, arrow tattoos, and yellow and orange clothing. Apparently the air benders weren’t as gone as everyone thought.

“Well…that’s not something you see every day.”

“Oh geez…another airbender? How could this be? Damn it, I’m surrounded by freaky people!” the boy muttered.

“Are you Sokka and Katara by chance?”

“Yeeeessss…who are you?” the girl on the big hairy whatever it was answered suspiciously.

“I’m Harry. Your granny sent me to find the two of you.”

“Who are you? How do you know gran-gran?” Sokka demanded.

“I’m a traveler. She got worried when you didn’t show up when she expected. She asked me to come find you. Were you responsible for that big light earlier?”

“We found Aang and his pet frozen in an iceberg. The light shot out when we broke him free.” Katara explained.

“Ah. I guess that would explain why the avatar I’ve heard so much about has been missing for a hundred years. Frozen in an iceberg were you? Weird. You seem fine though, that’s a neat trick.”

“You’re the avatar?” Sokka and Katara gasped, but Aang wasn’t listening.

“A hundred years? What are you talking about?” he asked at the same time.

“That’s what Kanna told me. The avatar disappeared a hundred years ago, and all the airbenders were wiped out. No one has seen one of your people since then. As you can imagine, I caused quite a stir when I appeared, since I was flying.”

“What do you mean the airbenders were wiped out? You’re lying!”

“That’s what I was told. It’s not like I went investigating or anything.” Harry replied, before tipping his broom so he could fly near the face of the hairy thing the three kids were riding on.

“Who’s this big fella?”

The thing groaned and Harry blinked. “Appa, huh? Nice to meet you Appa.”

Aang reared back in shock and drifted down as though carried by a stray breeze to land on Appa’s nose.

“How did you know that?”

“He just told me. He’s also getting cold and kind of sleepy being in the water like that, but he’s too tired and hungry to fly. I’m gonna help you guys out.”

Harry flicked out his wand and tapped Appa on the head and cast a ‘feather-light’ charm and then dug out some rope, which Appa caught in his teeth. Harry secured the other end to the back of his broom and then started flying back towards the village. Between the feather-light charm and the tug of the broom, Appa was able to muster up enough energy to help steer them and help tow them
along.

Harry caught Appa eyeing Hedwig and wagged a finger at him.

“No eating Hedwig, she’s with me. There are penguins back near the village if you’re hungry.”

Appa sighed, but stopped watching Hedwig.

“Hey! Appa’s a vegetarian!”
“Wow…you must be really hungry then.”

Appa just groaned in agreement.

“Good morning stranger. You rise early, that’s good.”

“Good morning, Kanna. Is there anything I can help with?”

“I don’t suppose you know how to fish? It seems my grandchildren brought back an airbender rather than the fish they went out after.”

“And a giant flying bison, yes.” Harry agreed with a laugh. “If you can point me towards a likely spot, I’ll certainly try.”

“Sokka can go with you. Katara has other chores to do, and the airbender doesn’t seem to be awake yet.”

“From what your grandkids told me, he seems to have been frozen in an iceberg. He may not be quite recovered from that.”

“Hmm.” Was all Kanna said in response. “Sokka!”

It didn’t take long for Harry and Sokka to hop into one of the few canoes the village had and set off to go fishing.

It was cold—to be expected at the South Pole. Harry thought he knew cold, but winters spent at Hogwarts hadn’t really prepared Harry for the temperatures here.

It was a stark place—white and blue everywhere you looked, with only the glaciers to break up the horizon line. It had been edging on summer when Harry left his own world; he couldn’t say he was too pleased to find himself back in the depths of winter again…even though it was apparently closer to fall than winter.

He’d been rather close to despair when he’d been told it was ‘still nice’ and hadn’t gotten really cold yet. He supposed the South Pole had a certain beauty to it, but it was a grim, merciless beauty that didn’t suffer fools gladly.

It was quiet too—he’d never been anywhere so quiet. He’d only been there for a short time, and he was already missing the sight of trees. He could probably stick around for a short while, but that was all. Life at the poles wasn’t for him.
Sokka paddled them out to a bay amidst the icebergs and brought the canoe to a halt.

“You do know how to fish, I hope.”

“Never did it before, but I’m sure I can still be of help.”

“Hmph.” Sokka muttered, while he began scanning the water for any sign of movement.

“Head over that way. Hedwig found a school of fish.”

“Huh?”

Sokka glanced up and saw Harry’s owl circling overhead a distance away from where they’d stopped.

“How does she know where the fish are?”

“She has good eyesight, and I asked her to keep an eye out. She’s expecting payment, of course.”

“If she helps catch it she’s due a share of the spoils.”

Sokka steered them towards where Hedwig had indicated and licked his lips as he readied his spear.

“Here, fishie, fishie, fishie!”

Sokka’s spear struck true and he withdrew it with a fat, wriggling fish on the end.

“Nice job. You’re pretty good with that thing.”

“Knowing there won’t be any dinner if you don’t do it right is a good incentive, believe me.”

“I believe you.”

Harry wasn’t sure if his weapons skills would translate well to spearing fish, so he didn’t bother. He just summoned a fish right out of the water from the opposite side of the boat that Sokka was fishing from. He waited until Sokka caught a second fish before summoning another. The fish swam off under the nearest iceberg soon after, so there was no more fish to be caught.

“Whoa, four already. Ha! I told Katara she was just in the way yesterday. She probably lied about catching a fish too…magic water, blah!”

Hedwig set off overhead and scanned the water, so Sokka followed after her.

“Magic water?”

“Oh, yeah…Katara’s a waterbender. She’s not trained. When the Fire Nation raided our village, they took all our water benders away. That’s how we lost our mom. Somehow, the Fire Nation knew there was a water bender here….Our mom told them it was her. She said she’d go with them quietly if they left the rest of us alone. They killed her.”

“I’m sorry. I lost my parents at a young age myself.”

“Not your fault.”
They sat in silence for a bit, and caught a few more fish, before following Hedwig out further.

“So…your sister has powers but she can’t use them?”

“Yeah. She wants nothing more than to get training…sadly; it’s probably for the best that she doesn’t know any waterbending, though you can’t convince her of that. Fire Nation has been leaving us alone, which is why my dad and the other men of the tribe felt it was safe to leave to go help out the Earth Kingdom in the war. If they were to ever learn that they didn’t actually get the last water bender in these parts though…”

“They’d come back to get her?”

“Yeah.”

Hedwig spotted another school of fish, so they busied themselves getting to it.

“I’m a bit worried that Katara’s lack of training isn’t going to matter for much longer. She was doing some crazy stuff yesterday and she didn’t even notice…”

“What kind of crazy stuff?”

“The whole day was weird. We were just floating along, looking for fish, and the next thing you know, this crazy current carries us off and smashes us into some ice. We managed to dodge for a while, but then two ice floes crashed together and smashed our canoe and carried us a bit further. Katara started having a fit and waving her arms around and the water just started surging all around us, and the iceberg up ahead started smashing to pieces. When it shattered, another that was down beneath the surface just pops up, practically right underneath us, and then we saw there was someone trapped inside…and then he opened his eyes. She took my club and started smashing at the ball of ice he was in and it just shattered and let out that big beam of light. But yeah…she did all that and didn’t even notice.”

“So, she can control water by waving her arms around?”

“Apparently…though whenever she tried to do anything before she mostly just made ripples. What if it’s getting stronger and she won’t be able to hide it anymore? Without a teacher she’ll never be able to do enough with it to do much…and by herself she wouldn’t be able to fight off a whole ship full of troops determined to take her down.”

“Are there no more groups like yours down here? Other villages?”

“Not anymore. There were never a whole lot of us, but there’s now a lot less than there used to be. We haven’t heard from our sister tribe at the North Pole in years because of the war. Gran-gran said we used to visit back and forth. It’s just out of the question these days—it’s on the other side of the world and there are too many Fire Nation ships on the water to make it a good idea.”

They had been out for a couple of hours, moving further and further from the village, when the sky suddenly lit up overhead.

“Fireworks?”

“Damn it! Someone must have gone near the forbidden ship!”
“Forbidden ship?”

Sokka turned the boat around.

“It was probably that damned airbender kid... he’s not very serious and he doesn’t listen well. There’s a Fire Nation ship stuck in ice a bit away from the village. It’s forbidden to go near it because we’re pretty sure they booby trapped the thing before they abandoned it. Now, because someone went and set off the traps, any Fire Nation ships in the area are going to come investigate... and my water bender sister and the last known airbender, who may or may not be the avatar, are sitting ducks!”

Harry nodded, equally grim, and helped paddle. They could only hope they got back before it was too late.

“I am personally going to strangle that kid when we get back. Anything happens to my village, and it’s his fault!”

They were rounding the last bend on their approach to the village when Sokka suddenly paled and began paddling faster.

“Can you smell it? Coal smoke! That means Fire Nation!”

The rounded the bend just in time to see a small orange and yellow figure walking on to a metal ship, accompanied by a handful of grim soldiers in red armor. The defensive wall around the village had been toppled in one section by the gangplank the ship had lowered, elsewhere parts of the wall, and the watchtower Sokka had built looked partially melted. The villagers were standing in a huddle as far from the ship and its soldiers as they could stand. Just as the gangplank was raised, a lone figure broke away from the crowd and yelled ‘AANG!’ The people on the ship paid no heed; they just backed away and started through the water, away from them.

“Katara!” Sokka muttered “Stay away from the scary-freaky guys on the ship!”

The ship, which was moving much faster than their little canoe, was nearly out of sight as they pulled into shore.

Sokka leapt from the ship and ran for the village, looking panicked and dismayed. Harry pulled the canoe ashore, gathered up their catch, and followed more slowly.

“We have to rescue him! He’s the Avatar! He’s needed to save the world from the Fire Nation! We have to do something!” Harry could hear Katara crying as he moved closer.

He handed the fish they’d caught over to Kanna, who nodded her thanks.

“What can you do, Katara? That ship is full of Fire benders. If that boy is the Avatar, they shan’t hold him for long.” Kanna chided.

“He won’t be able to get away though... even if he can beat them. His bison is here, and I doubt they’re going to let him keep his glider.” Harry pointed out.

“See! That guy agrees with me! Gran-gran, he needs help... and both he and I need training. He’s been gone for a hundred years, and he’s alone!”

Harry kept silent—this wasn’t his village, and these weren’t his people. Kanna seemed to be in
charge—it was up to her to say whether or not her grandchildren could leave the village and mount a rescue. If it came down to it, Harry could probably take Appa and rescue the kid himself—but the girl needed training, and if the Fire Nation came back after finding the lost Avatar in the village, sooner or later she was going to be grabbed or simply killed for being a waterbender—she had a fighter’s spirit, he could see that much. She wasn’t going to sit quietly anymore, not if she thought there was a chance to fight back. Kanna could obviously see that as well—she realized Katara was probably just going to run off later, permission or not. She closed her eyes and sighed.

“Very well…gather what you need and rescue the Avatar. Go to the Northern Tribe. The Avatar will be able to find a waterbending master there. I expect to see you both back here someday.”

Katara’s face lit up, and she embraced her grandmother warmly. “Gran-gran…thank you!” She ran off without a backwards glance to gather her things for a long a trip.

“Gran-gran…are you sure? Dad left me to protect the village.” Sokka asked.

“All our warriors are gone…all but you, Sokka. With both of you out of the village, they will have no reason to bother us. We will be safe and well. Go…rescue the Avatar and help him put an end to this endless war.”

Sokka embraced his grandmother as well and went to gather his things.

“Stranger…”

“I’ll look after them. Don’t worry.” Harry promised.

“Thank you.” She replied quietly.

Harry wondered if either of her grandchildren realized how much it cost her to let them go.

Sokka and Katara came running out a short time later, and climbed aboard Appa after saying their goodbyes.

“Let’s see if you really know how to fly, Appa. Hup! Hup!…uh…Go! Go!…um…Yip yip?”

Sokka let out a strangled yell as Appa groaned and then took to the air.

“W..Wow! You really can fly, huh?”

Harry rose beside them on his broom.

“That way. They’re moving pretty fast. They’re nearly out of sight already, even from up here.”

They waved one last goodbye to the village, which had stayed gathered to watch them leave, and took off in pursuit of the fleeing ship.

The ship was surprisingly easy to follow—all they had to do was follow the trail of the filthy black smoke it was trailing in the air, which of course froze on contact with the air and came down as black snow.

It was sort of sickening, really—this whole land was so clean and pristine. The black metal ship with its belching smoke was an alien invader of the worst kind.
As they pulled closer, they could see some sort of commotion on the deck, and then a tiny orange and yellow figure scampered up the tower that crouched over the back end of the ship like a monkey.

“Aang got himself free! Look!” Katara pointed.

He spotted Appa headed his way and smiled brightly, before flicking open his glider and leaping off the side of the ship.

One of the soldiers leapt after him and hung from his foot, and the extra weight made Aang start losing altitude.

“Oh no! Aang!”

Harry buzzed past them and shot off a stupefy at the hanging soldier—it wouldn’t knock him out, because of the armor, but it did knock him loose and back onto the deck. Aang soared free and made for Appa. When he landed he looked back and his eyes widened as he saw a double stream of fire shot by two of the soldiers on deck. Harry was forced to spin out of the way—Aang used a focused blast of air to knock the fire aside and into one of the icy cliffs that towered overhead to either side of them. The iceberg exploded and a part of the ice broke off and clattered down onto the ship, damaging it. As they sped off, they could see the one, desperate soldier who had tried to drag Aang back onto the ship by main force thrash his way out of the ice and stand there raging, while flames shot from his fists.

“Man! What is that guy’s problem?” Sokka laughed in disbelief.

“He said something about being able to finally go home and restore his honor for capturing me.” Aang explained.

“He makes it sound like he was out looking for you.”

“I think he was.”

“You’ve been gone for a hundred years.”

“Yeah…weird, huh?” Aang laughed nervously.

“Man…daylight really doesn’t stick around long in this part of the world, does it?” Harry sighed.

“It’s okay. We should be able to see the mountains soon.” Aang assured him.

“Mountains?”

“Yeah, there’s a mountain range not too much further from here. That’s where my home, the Southern Air Temple is. We won’t be able to get there today. Appa’s getting tired already. We can find someplace to camp for the night and then we can go see the temple tomorrow. You’ll all love it; it’s the most beautiful place in the world. Hey, look! There are the mountains now!”

Distance was deceptive out in the middle of the ocean like they all were. It took them another two hours to reach the southernmost peak, and then nearly an hour after that to find a good place to stop for the night. They found a sheltered cove surrounded on three sides by high walls of stone. There were several bushes growing out of the rock, which Appa began eating as soon as they landed.

Hedwig dove and skimmed one of the jutting cliffs and rose with a small squeaking animal in her
claws, which she settled down with to start munching.

“What are you doing?” Katara asked curiously.

“Making a ring of stones to build a campfire in.” Harry answered. He looked around, but there was no wood to be found. There was plenty of seaweed washed up on the edges of the cove though.

Seeing Sokka and Katara were both busy digging out their bedrolls, Harry transfigured the nearest pile of seaweed into a small pile of firewood and gathered it up to plop into the pit he’d formed. Sokka slowed what he was doing to stare at the wood for a moment, but went back to what he was doing without comment.

Harry shot a stream of fire out of his wand, and soon had a merry blaze going. Katara screamed, and Sokka scrambled backwards and drew his club.

“Fire Nation!”

Harry sighed and just looked at them.

“I’ve told you, I’m not a bender.”

“We just saw you! You’re a firebender!”

“Do you see the stick in my hand?”

“Yeah…”

Harry made a small lick of flame shoot out of the end, and then stopped it before tucking his wand away.

“Oh. You have a fire-making…stick.”

“Something like that, yeah.”

Harry wasted no time in rolling out his sleeping bag and crawling inside, and then spreading his fur-lined cloak over himself. Flying all day as they had been, after spending hours out on the chill water with Sokka had left him feeling frozen through. Dressed for the weather or not, he still wasn’t used to it being quite so cold, even if where they currently were was considerably warmer than where they’d been. He was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the bedroll.

“What are you doing?”

Harry turned his head slightly to see Katara nearby, perched on a rock and watching him with undisguised interest.

“Training. You should do some as well. I was talking to your brother about waterbending, and I was thinking about stuff you could do to start training yourself before we get to the North Pole.”

“But you’re not a waterbender.”

“Maybe not, but I do know fighting. I was thinking about how water moves and how one could use it offensively, and how that should translate into training. Water ebbs and flows. When water hits
something it ripples and bends around the object and then ripples flow backwards. Your brother was
telling me that you can make the water ripple, and that you claimed to have caught a fish by lifting a
ball of water right out of the stream, and that you tore apart a glacier and revealed Aang’s ice ball
because you were angry and waving your arms around. So, what I’m thinking is you should try to
lift up some water, pull it towards you and send it out and then pull it back and around yourself and
send it back. Experiment, see how far out you can get it to go and keep its shape, see how fast you
can move it backwards and forwards, see how many shapes you can make it. Play with it. Become
the water and move with it.” he explained while demonstrating the sort of movements he thought
would work.

“Whenever I tried before…yesterday, catching the fish was really the first time I actually got it to do
anything.”

“No you know you can do it, and that’s half the battle won. Now, it’s time to start testing your
boundaries and find out what’s possible.”

“Ebb and flow. You make it sound easy.”

“It’s a starting point. You won’t know till you try.”

Having said his piece, he went back to his tai chi practice and left her to confront the sea on her own.

He didn’t have to look to see that she’d started playing with the water, he could feel it. She wasn’t
infusing the water with her chakra, but she was reaching towards it—the water itself seemed to meet
her halfway. It was decidedly odd. It also made him realize that he might not be able to learn to do
what she did—true, he could make water at will with magic, but he would have liked to have been
able to learn something new. He stifled his sigh and moved on to the academy taijutsu he’d learned
while being Shikamaru and tried to keep his mind off of it. He turned to check on what Katara was
doing and found her following his instructions. She had a tube of water traveling around her in a
circle, though she seemed almost on the verge of losing control of it at times. Still, it was definitely
working.

“Look! I’m doing it! It works!”

“Good job, Katara. Keep it up.”

He finished his practice and wandered towards the fire. Katara was still playing with the water,
completely focused on what she was doing. That was fine with him; if she could keep that level of
dedication, he was sure she’d be a force to be reckoned with in no time.

Seeing she was occupied, and Sokka and Aang were both still sleeping, He pulled out his tent and
set it up so he could dig out some of his food supplies. He went through what he had packed away
and gathered up a few things to leave out for easy retrieval. He hated to further burden Appa, but it
was that or trying to explain to the others why his tent looked like a one-man pup-tent on the outside,
but had a full-sized fancy apartment inside. While this world was undoubtedly magical, it wasn’t
quite as magical as home was—he’d yet to see anyone do anything akin to what he and his people
could do.
After packing the tent back away, he got started on breakfast—oatmeal, which would not only be warm and filling, but would also not offend Aang’s vegetarian sensibilities, and was also very easy to make. He got a pot of tea started as well, though he cheated a bit, and just zapped the pot with a heating charm to get the water hot enough to steep the leaves; he didn’t feel like waiting.

Aang and Sokka both woke when they smelled food. After eating and gathering up their things they got back underway.

Aang set Appa to gliding between the peaks of the mountain range—it was a pretty impressive place. They were flying just below cloud level, but the peaks continued up into the clouds. When they got to the heart of the range, Aang smiled brilliantly.

“Here we are! The Southern Air Temple. You’re all going to love it; it’s the most beautiful place in the world. You hear that, Appa? We’re almost home, buddy!”

“Aang…it’s been a hundred years. “ Katara spoke up quietly.

“Just because no one’s seen an airbender in a while doesn’t mean they’re all gone. The only way to get to the temple is on a sky bison.”

“I’m just saying that…a hundred years is a long time. I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

“Hang on everyone!” Aang called while steering Appa straight up. Appa picked up speed and they burst through the cloud cover above them. Harry held on to Appa’s saddle with one hand, while shielding Hedwig, who had taken shelter with them, with the other. They burst from the clouds and were dazzled by the sunlight above them. Towering over their heads was a building carved out of the mountain peak.

There was a wide landing at the base of the peak, just above the cloud layer, which Appa made for. There was a pathway zigzagging towards the temple proper that led from the landing and wound up the mountain. There were terraces with trees and flowers everywhere you looked.

Aang laughed delightedly and was off Appa’s head the moment they landed. He was already halfway to the temple before the rest of them had even climbed down. Harry took a careful look around and sighed.

At first sight, the place looked beautiful and idyllic, but after that first glimpse, the signs of abandonment were clear to see. There were weeds growing between the paving stones, and it was quiet—far too quiet.

He felt bad for the kid, he really did. He couldn’t even imagine how it would feel to wake up one day, discover a hundred years had passed and find out your entire race was gone. He made himself follow the others up to the temple—the kid was going to need someone when he finally accepted the truth.

“Look! That’s where we used to play air ball…and over there is where I used to have my lessons…I don’t understand…this place was always full of monks and sky bison and lemurs. They should be all over the place!”

Katara and Sokka traded a grim glance. Sokka cleared his throat and tried to smile.
“Hey, why don’t you show us how to play air ball?”

Aang smiled widely, though his eyes stayed haunted. He seemed grateful for the distraction.

“Sure, come on!”

Harry left them to it and chose instead to wander further along the bottom most parts of the temple. He tried to picture what it must have been like, once—everything carefully tended, monks meditating and walking the halls in quiet contemplation, kids playing airball, sky bison and lemurs frolicking in the air and through the trees, probably the sound of chanting echoing through the peaks...in the courtyard there, dozens of boys in yellow and orange at their lessons, people on gliders soaring around the top of the peak. It was a melancholy sort of place—it made Harry’s heart ache just being there. He couldn’t imagine what Aang must be going through.

He looked over to see how Aang and Sokka’s game was going. They each stood on one of a few dozen wooden poles that were standing together to form the playing field. At either end was a goal. Aang sent a ball of air spinning and bouncing at high speed through the poles, and into Sokka who bent double with an ‘oof’ and went flying bodily through the goal. He crashed into an exposed wall of rock and went down. He climbed to his feet, and then he and Katara stared at something on the ground.

“Aang?” Come here...you should see this.” Sokka called, face grim.

Curious, Harry started towards them, and he frowned suspiciously when Katara fidgeted, and then hurriedly waved her arms to knock down the snow clinging to the wall to cover up whatever they’d found on the ground.

“What is it?”

“Just a new water bending move, see?”

“Pretty good.”

Harry debated a moment and then decided to see what they were covering up. Sokka and Katara both yelped and stumbled aside when a big gust of wind blew away the snow...and left a red helmet with a skeletal faceplate behind.

Aang made a choked off sound and stumbled backwards into Harry.

“Fire Nation...here...they...they’re really gone, aren’t they?” He gasped.

The skin on Harry’s arms and the back of his neck prickled, and Sokka and Katara both began backing away while watching Aang worriedly as a wind began to pick up around Aang’s feet. It was the same feeling Harry had felt before the bright light shot up into the sky the day they’d found Aang. Harry acted instinctively and grabbed Aang’s wrists, crossed his arms over himself as though he were hugging himself and then pulled him backwards into his chest.

The unexpected contact seemed to be enough to startle Aang out of whatever was happening and the wind died down just as Aang slumped in Harry’s embrace.

“I’m sorry, Aang. Up until we got here, I really hoped, for your sake, that they weren’t as gone as people thought.”
“I really am the last airbender.”

Aang made a noise, almost too low to hear and slumped further.

“If you’re hurting, Aang, let it out. There’s no shame in mourning the people you’ve lost.” Sokka said quietly.

Aang struggled, as though wanting to escape but Harry held firm. When the first sound of tears began, Harry turned him to face him, wrapped his arms around him and began rubbing his back. Sokka and Katara moved forward and added themselves to the mix, forming a sheltering wall on all sides of the grieving boy.

“I know it’s not the same, Aang…but you’re not alone. We, all of us, we’re your family now.” Katara whispered, her voice earnest.

After the first storm had passed, Aang pulled back from all of them, head down and obviously embarrassed as he scrubbed at his eyes.

“Grieving takes time. It isn’t something you can do all at once. When it gets to be too much, it’s good to find something else to concentrate on for a while until you’re ready to let out a little more. Why don’t you and Katara go do some waterbending practice for a little while? Is there a fountain or a pool of some sort around that you’ll be able to work with?”

Aang looked up at him. His face was streaked with tears and his eyes red and swollen.

“Or you could just use the tears on your face. I imagine that would certainly take people by surprise.”

Aang just stared at him for a moment, and then he started laughing—it was a rather painful sound, not the usual light-hearted chortles they were used to hearing from him, but Harry didn’t call attention to the fact. He just rubbed his bald head lightly and smiled at him.

“If it helps, meditate on the nature of water for a while, and try to feel it and understand it before you try doing anything with it. Katara lives on ice surrounded by water…up here, I’m sure you became well acquainted with the nature of air, but not water so much, so you might have to do a little work beforehand.”

Aang wiped the last of the tears from his face and stepped back, and then gave Harry a shallow bow, with his fist held against his open palm held in front of him.

“I will follow your instructions, Sifu Harry.”

Harry copied his gesture and bowed back.

After Aang and Katara had wandered off to find water, Harry turned to Sokka.

“Don’t feel you’re being left out. I’ll be training directly with you. I can show you some hand to hand moves to help out if you get disarmed, and I can teach you sword, staff and knife fighting if you want. We’re safe and out of the way for the moment. I figure we can stay here for a while, give Aang and Katara a chance to master waterbending, get you shaped up and make plans for what
we’re going to do next. Also, this is a temple…there’s probably mystical avatar-y stuff Aang needs to do while we’re here as well. We can also look for a library—that’ll be helpful, I’m sure. I’d also like to do a thorough search of this place to see if we can figure out how Fire Nation got up here—we don’t know if they swing by periodically to check these places; it would be good to know how they arrived so we can prepare for any surprises.”

“We’re staying here? But…I thought we needed to head to the Northern Water Tribe so they could get training…”

“You didn’t see Katara at her practice earlier; she stopped around the time you woke up. I gave her some tips and it seemed to be enough to get her started bending at will. I have lots more ideas. I was thinking about it and well, Appa is very conspicuous. If Aang needs to learn water first, then going to the North Pole is what everyone expects—and we already know there are Fire Nation ships patrolling and looking for him, even though he’s been gone for a hundred years. They got a good look at Aang, at Appa, and possibly the rest of us as well. If Fire Nation is waging war on the whole rest of the world, they’ve got troops and ships to spare—think about it, they had one whose job was to patrol the South Pole where there is only a small village of women and children left. Aang only just woke up after being frozen for a hundred years. He needs time to adjust and to train without being harried. I really think the best thing we can do right now is stay hidden so he has that time. We would be easily spotted going to the North Pole, and probably bring a fleet down on their heads. I’m hopeful that, if they do send a fleet that way, it will be to watch and wait, and not attack. It’s not perfect, but it’s the best I’ve got right now.”

Sokka considered his words for a while and then nodded.

“Alright, sounds like a plan. So…what do we do first?”

“First, we explore this place end to end, top to bottom. When setting up an encampment, the first thing you do, before anything else, is secure your perimeter. If the worst case scenario should come to pass, we want to know the layout of this place, and where we can set up ambushes, and of course where the most likely angle of attack would be coming from. Once we have that down, we make sure Appa is settled—get our stuff, take off his saddle and make sure there’s enough food around here for him. We should get a good idea of food supplies, water, and the like while doing our tour…so the next thing will be to find a defensible location to set up our base camp. Once we’ve done what we can to keep our people safe, we’ll get started on your training.”

Sokka nodded and followed.

Sokka had grown up knowing he would be a warrior of the tribe someday, so Harry’s instructions resonated with him.

“Once we do what we can to keep our people safe…” It sounded like something his father would have said.

That was the whole point of being a warrior of the tribe—not glory, not honor, not bragging rights, although if you were lucky, they came with the territory. No, first and foremost, the warriors of the tribe were there to protect their people.

Since his father and the other men had left he’d been trying his best to live up to that ideal. He’d been trying to do patrols and maintain discipline—a difficult prospect when your troops were toddlers and small children. All his dedication over the last two years had all been for nothing when it counted—Fire Nation had still marched into his village, threatened his people and kidnapped Aang.
This was his chance to start making up for his failure.

As he and Harry started their patrol, he realized he was already feeling better than he had in a long time.

"Man…more bones. This place is starting to give me the heebie-jeebies. I mean, it’s one thing to know that this place was the site of a massacre, but to know."

Harry crouched down and studied the bones and their relative locations for a moment and then gestured Sokka to crouch down beside him.

"What do you see here?"
"A bunch of dead guys."
"Obvious…what else? It was the same at every bone pile we’ve found so far."

"The creeps from the Fire Nation don’t play fair. I mean look at this! Six on one. Real tough guys."

"Six on one. We can tell who’s who by their clothing. Five airbenders died here facing ten times their numbers. Five airbenders." Harry stressed. "Unless there’s a hidden pile of bones somewhere…where are all the rest of them? These guys were all old men."

"How can you tell?"

"Look here. See how these bones, the ends are fused? Look at the same bones on this guy here, under the armor. The ends aren’t fused. He was young, a lot younger than the airbender was. Now look at this armored guy…fusion here and here…but not here. He was youngish, older than that guy, younger than this guy. The airbender had a bit of arthritis in his back…see the vertebra there? It’s not supposed to look like that. It should look like this. All five of the airbenders we’ve found have shown these signs of advanced age. The firebenders range from youngish to middle-aged, what you’d expect of a group of soldiers, really. Each one of these old men held off many times their number of firebenders. Where are the rest? We haven’t found middle-aged, teenaged or child airbenders. There are no babies. I can’t say I really know how these temples were set up, but if they were teachers, there should be youngsters to teach here. We won’t really know for sure without examining the other temples, but so far it really looks like there should have been survivors."

"I hate to say it, because it’s sick and wrong but…it’s entirely possible that the old men held off the solidiers so the kids could all flee to another temple and they were cut down there."

"Definitely a possibility. It’s also possible there were more soldiers…and they took the youngest children at least."

"They wanted them dead. Why would they take the youngest kids?"

"Think about it for a moment. If Fire Nation was at all worried about completely shattering the balance because they weren’t sure what the result would be, it would be an ideal solution from a certain point of view. Take the very youngest, the ones who wouldn’t remember this place or this way of life, and raise them up as Fire Nation. The cycle isn’t broken…but the next airbender avatar is a fire nation airbending avatar. They could be controlled, because they wouldn’t even think to try airbending—they're Fire Nation. It would be firebending or nothing, right? Katara knew she was a
waterbender, but until recently she couldn’t do much with it. If it never even occurred to her that she could possibly be a waterbender…”

Sokka sat back on his heels looking grim.

“We can’t really say anything, of course…not yet. It was a hundred years ago. We don’t know that’s what happened. They could have fled and met their end at one of the other temples. They could have gone into hiding. They could have been carried away to become citizens of Fire Nation. We just don’t know. I suppose we can broach the possibility once the war is over…give Aang some hope that he’s not the absolute last of his kind, but…”

“It would be cruel to offer up that kind of hope without some kind of proof to build on.”

“Yeah.” Harry sighed as he rolled to his feet. “We’ll have to find out what the funeral rites for the airbenders are. Performing monkly duties and laying his people to rest might give him some kind of closure, cold comfort though it might be.”

“Yeah…we should probably finish up.”

“This back corner here should be the last of …it.”

“Did you find something? Not kids…”

“No. Look at this.”

“It’s half a footprint.”

“Coming out from under the wall, and captured in stone. Stone that had to be liquid when the print was made. I think we’ve just found how they got up here.”

“They had an earthbender make them a tunnel up into the mountain.” Sokka realized, sounding sick.

“That doesn’t make any sense! Everyone knows Fire Nation did this! Why the hell would Earth Kingdom help them?”

“We don’t know that Earth Kingdom helped them. They might only have needed one. He could have agreed to help them, he might have been forced. We have no way of knowing one way or another.”

“What kind of monster would agree to help anyone do something like this?”

“If they were forced, we don’t know that they were a monster. What if they held the guy’s wife and children and told him ‘hey, if you ever want to see them again, you’re going to make us a tunnel, and we know you won’t be stupid enough to try to trap us here because, hey, if we don’t send back word they all die. And maybe the guy doesn’t want to help, but his family’s counting on him and so he says, ‘hey, they’re airbenders. They’ll just fly away, and that’s not my fault because I did what I was told and so it doesn’t matter.’ Or, it could be that whoever this guy was, he had a grudge of some sort, or maybe he was just a monster and didn’t care what the tunnel he made was going to be used for so long as he got paid. Or, maybe he just got hired by someone pretending to be an airbender who told him they wanted a staircase so friends could visit even if they didn’t have a sky bison. We just don’t know.”

Harry stood again and clapped Sokka on the shoulder. “I’m thinking lunch…in the courtyard, under the sun.”

“Far away from bone piles and treacherous tunnels. Yeah, I could go for that.”
Chapter Summary

Harry invites the gaang to celebrate the autumn equinox with him. An attack by Fire Nation forces them to flee their hideout and go in search of an Earthbending teacher.

After that first night, things quickly formed into a routine.

They set up their camp inside the temple in one of the many large, open rooms they found.

They had originally thought to set up in the bedrooms they found, but the empty beds brought the missing airbenders too much to mind, and Aang had been unable to sleep. Harry and Sokka had simply moved their camp in the morning, without too much fuss.

Harry usually rose with the sun, as did Aang, once he heard Harry moving around. They started spending the early mornings together, doing tai chi until Aang got the forms down—which didn’t take long at all, the kid was a natural. They would practice near the fountain and reflecting pool that stood in a courtyard in the middle of the temple complex, so Aang could work in some waterbending practice while they did so.

Once they were done their early morning practice, Harry would make breakfast—usually oatmeal, with a bit of cinnamon, or some fruit and nuts gathered from the temple grounds, or a bit of sugar to mix it up, along with some tea. Harry could only be grateful that magic allowed you to make more of something you already had, or they would have run out of oatmeal before too long—he hadn’t been expecting to feed four people, just himself.

Once everyone was fed, Aang and Katara would head off for their dual waterbending practice, while Harry and Sokka headed out towards an open courtyard for ‘warrior training’.

Sokka was coming along pretty well, and Harry was quite pleased with his progress. He was focused, and dedicated and didn’t complain about the endless drills followed by short spars, followed by sit ups and push ups and pull ups and squats…followed by more drills, followed by another spar. Sokka was usually wrung out like a wet noodle by the time they called a halt each day, but he bore it stoically for the most part. He’d become very fond of hot baths though.

Harry had found the monks’ bathing chamber, which consisted of a trough large enough for several people to stand around that was fed from a cistern nearby. He had reshaped the trough a bit to make a bathtub suitable for soaking in and taken to hitting the water with a couple of heating charms so they could take a hot bath—which they did after sword practice each day.

After that was usually lunch, and then everyone would do their own thing for a bit. After much begging and pleading, Harry had convinced Aang to open the temple’s library for him. He’d been a bit reluctant at first, but had finally agreed after Harry had pointed out that as he was only twelve, master airbender or not, there was probably still a lot left for him to learn. They spent an hour or two each day, going through the scrolls, Harry sometimes making copies that they could take with them if they had to leave suddenly.

Evenings were spent meditating, telling stories around the campfire, or with Sokka and Harry
cheering on Aang and Katara while they tried their hand at ‘waterball’—which was basically
‘airball’ played with a ball of water.

They had been at the Southern Air Temple for nearly two weeks already, and it had been both fun
and helpful. The peaceful atmosphere in which to practice had done wonders for all of them, but
most especially Aang and Katara, who were progressing by leaps and bounds with their
waterbending, enough so that Harry had them start sparring with water while he and Sokka watched.
After each bout, they would dissect their tactics, and suggest things they might have done instead.

Harry also had Aang start teaching him the monks’ airbending style. It seemed to operate on the
same principles as Ba gua zhang, which he’d seen done but had never studied to any degree. Aang
wasn’t a very good teacher—airbending and the fighting style that went with it came so naturally to
him that he had a bit of trouble explaining why they did things the way they did. After some initial
frustration, he did seem to get better at it though, and even claimed it helped him understand it better
as well. It was really the first time he thought about any of it in that way, or was forced to break it
down to teach another.

“I guess it’s good you have me to practice on.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, unless I’m wrong, I assumed that you’d be reopening the temples someday. Some of the
things I’ve read in the library seem to suggest you could teach people to be airbenders. I figured you
could pick one of the temples to reopen, put out a call for people who want to learn. Not everyone is
cut out for the life of a monk or nun, but I’m sure there will be some. The best of your students could
then go and reopen the remaining temples. Maybe, one day, you’ll have a new group of airbenders—
some who stay in the temple, some who learn enough to airbend, but who return to whatever their
lives were before. It may not be exactly like it was—but different isn’t necessarily bad.”

“I guess I hadn’t really thought that far ahead. I still have to defeat the Fire Lord.”

“And you will, when it’s time.”

“I should be doing more.”

Harry held up a hand to quiet him and fixed him with a compassionate gaze.

“You’re doing all you can right now. Your only job and worry right now is to learn. You’re one
person, Aang, and you’re only twelve. The world has gotten by without you for this long…it can
wait a little longer.”

“But I’m the avatar.”

“And the avatar is still one person. You can’t be everywhere at once, and you can’t solve every
problem—anyone who is expecting you to is expecting too much. So long as you put forth a good
effort and do your best each day, you’re doing your job.”

Aang smiled, and it seemed a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

“Did you know the autumn equinox is in two days?” Harry asked suddenly.

“Um, no, but then I haven’t really been keeping track. Why?”

“Well, on the day of the equinox we’re going to dance.”
“We are? Why?”

“It’ll be fun…and also, it’s something my people do. Well, we used to do. After we went into hiding, people were ‘discouraged’ from keeping up the tradition. My friends from school and I decided to resurrect the seasonal dances and we’ve been doing them at the solstices and equinoxes the last couple of years…I don’t know if we’re going to be able to keep doing them though. My godfather got married a few months ago, on the summer solstice, and so we decided to just do it then as part of the wedding celebration. The thing you have to understand is, the reason they were discouraged in the first place is because they had a certain power to them. Their original purpose was to mark the four quarters and also to bless the fields and call back the sun, to celebrate the bounty of the summer and the harvest…and to build and sustain community ties—and they do. Since we started doing them again, the crops and the orchards around the school have been so fruitful we were able to sell off most of the food and still feed all the students. There were tensions and deep divisions between the four houses in my school—feuds and resentments that had festered over generations. Most of those rifts have either outright healed, or their on their ways towards doing so. The problem is, if there are enough people dancing, and enough power is generated, it starts reaching out and sweeping up anyone who’s nearby…which includes the people we’re hiding from. That’s what happened at my godfather’s wedding. We were at the top of the hill, and there was a town at the bottom. They all started dancing too, and we all just danced together long into the night. It was a great night, really…but our government got angry at all of us and took steps to make the people in the town forget it ever happened. When I left there was talk of outlawing all the traditional dances so it could never happen again. I don’t know if the dances would have any power here, and even if they do, there’s only the four of us here, so it probably wouldn’t reach very far…but it couldn’t hurt, and it will be fun regardless.”

“Sounds great. So…is it a special dance?”

“Yeah. It’s easy enough to learn. I’ll show all of you tonight, and then we can practice a bit so we’re ready for the equinox.”

“Let’s go practice now! Hey Katara! Sokka! Come on and dance with us!”

Harry watched Aang flit off all excited with some bemusement.

“Well…apparently the whole idea isn’t going to be as hard a sell as I thought it would be.”

Zuko, banished crown prince of the Fire Nation, sat within his quarters meditating in front of a row of candles. The candle flames pulsed steadily in time with his breath, as though they were breathing with him. The door behind him opened with a creak and Uncle Iroh, Dragon of the West, retired general of the Fire Nation army stood framed within the doorway, quietly watching his nephew.

“You should not be disturbing me.”

“I apologize, Prince Zuko. I will return later when you have finished meditating. I do not want to disturb your calm.”

“Uncle, you told me that being able to keep a calm and level head is the sign of a great leader. Whatever it is, I’m certain I can handle it.”

Iroh sighed and unrolled the scroll he held in his hands.

“There have been no sightings of the Avatar from any of our ships or bases.”
“WHAT!” Zuko bellowed as the candle flames shot skyward, filling the room with flame and smoke. Uncle Iroh was already waving a fan around his face, having expected such a reaction from his volatile nephew. “You really need to open a window or something…”

“How can there have been no sightings? They’re flying, on a big, white, hairy bison that has to weigh several tons! It’s been two weeks, uncle! Someone, somewhere has to have seen them!”

“Calm yourself, nephew. I am simply reporting to you what has been reported to me. If it is any comfort to you, Commander Zhao has had no more luck finding their trail than we have.”

Zuko began stomping around the narrow confines of the room, gnashing his teeth and clenching his fists spasmodically, spurting flames from his hands every time he did so.

“This makes no sense! They can’t have just disappeared into thin air!”

“The world is large, Prince Zuko.”

“But that large! Even if they kept above cloud level, they would still have to land occasionally—that great hairy beast wouldn’t simply be able to keep flying without eating and stopping to rest. They’d also have to dip down below the clouds once in a while to check their course!”

“They may be only travelling at night.”

“We still have patrols and guards and watchmen who are on duty at night! They would have to get supplies, rest…no. Someone would have seen them if they had passed by. A creature like that hasn’t been seen in decades. Even if our men weren’t in the right spot at the right time to witness their passage themselves, word would still have gotten back to them as it spread among the populace.”

Zuko spun on his heel and stomped out of the room towards the bridge, Iroh following placidly in his wake.

When he arrived at the bridge, he found the crew standing to one side, eyeing Zuko warily. No one liked getting in the Prince’s way when he was in one of his moods. The Prince himself was poring over maps, and calculating possible routes the avatar and his group might have taken after they’d last seen them.

“Of course…I’m a fool. There was another airbender with them. That’s why no one has seen them! They never left the area. CAPTAIN, SET COURSE FOR THE SOUTERN AIR TEMPLE!”

While the crew scrambled to obey the cranky Prince’s orders, General Iroh came and stood beside him to stare down at the range of mountains a few hours northwest of where they had last spotted them that Zuko had stabbed with his finger while having his epiphany.

“Your idea has merit, Prince Zuko…however, we saw ourselves that the avatar is already a trained airbender. For what reason would they travel to an air temple?”

“The other airbender…he was dressed in blue and furs, like the water tribe. There were two other water tribe people with them. He must have been living with the northern water tribe and learning what the avatar needed to know to learn water bending. They’re being careful. They realized we’d notice them heading to the north pole and what it meant…so they were sneaky about it. If there are more airbenders out there, there might be one living in Earth Kingdom somewhere, either learning
earthbending style or transporting an earthbender to where the avatar is hiding. Instead of having the avatar running around in search of teachers, they’re bringing teachers to him. They’re at the Southern Air Temple, uncle. I just know it.”

“I feel like an idiot. Why are we doing this again?”

“Harry already explained all that! It’s a sacred ritual of his people…and it will be fun.” Katara scolded.

“When are we going to start?” Aang asked, wanting to stave off an argument.

“Soon…” Harry answered distractedly. “After we started doing them a few times and completed a whole cycle for the year, we noticed we would just feel it when it was time.” He tapped the yellow cube he had set up out of the way on the balustrade surrounding the large courtyard and moved to join them. “And it’s time now.”

Sokka and Katara both shivered when the first strains of the music began—it still freaked them out, hearing the sounds of so many instruments coming out of a little cube. They had both decided it must be full of tiny music spirits that Harry had brought with him from the spirit world—there was no other explanation.

They had practiced several times over the last two days, and so were able to just begin dancing when the music started. Sokka continued grumbling a bit under his breath, but it was half-hearted, more for form’s sake than anything. Katara and Aang were both smiling and enjoying themselves, Harry was solemn but cheerful. They went through the whole dance from beginning to end and slowed, looking to Harry to see if they should continue. Harry nodded and kept dancing—he could feel the power starting to build—it was the same and yet different from when he’d done these dances in his own world, but something was definitely happening, so he gave himself over to the dance and let it lead where it would.

As though that were a signal, he could feel the weird shift that happened to one’s perceptions as the dance took hold—from here on out, the dance itself would determine the patterns woven.

Sokka began looking a bit panicked—he could feel himself being swept up; that was the only way he could describe it—and he wasn’t sure he liked the feeling.

“Just let go, Sokka. This is what’s supposed to happen. It won’t hurt you.”

Sokka had his doubts, but Harry had been a straight and solid guy since he met him—the sort of guy you wanted for a brother. He pushed away his doubts and let it take him, and hoped he wasn’t making a mistake—but, he trusted Harry wouldn’t lie to him about what was going on. As he let go, he suddenly realized they were dancing all wrong. He could feel the pattern they were supposed to make, and so he started moving to make it. They had been moving in straight lines in a square formation—they needed circles and twists. The others obviously realized it too because they began twisting and leaping and spinning as well.

Aang suddenly gasped and a smile that nearly split his face in two stretched his mouth as tears began streaming from his eyes—he didn’t stop dancing though.

It was strange, but Sokka suddenly felt that they were just one part of a much larger pattern, and
moreover, that they weren’t alone there on that mountaintop. The feeling was so strong, in fact, that he whirled away from the group and started dancing elsewhere in the courtyard—and Katara did as well, spinning off in the opposite direction. Harry and Aang moved to the center of the courtyard and danced together—the center of mass for the whole vortex…though he wasn’t even sure what that meant even as he thought that.

Sokka wasn’t sure how long they were all leaping and twirling around, but just as suddenly as it all had started, he could feel the energy draining away as he slowed his spin until he eventually came to a slow, gentle stop.

It was completely and utterly silent when they stopped, and it seemed even the eternal winds that continually spun through the place had gone silent. Aang turned in a slow circle, while the tears continued trailing down his cheeks; Sokka wasn’t sure what he was looking at, but he had a feeling he was seeing something he himself couldn’t. Aang suddenly bowed respectfully to the empty courtyard and then straightened. He was still crying, but he seemed strangely peaceful nonetheless.

Aang’s quiet voice broke the stillness, and it seemed to break whatever had kept Sokka and Katara still and silent as well.

“Sifu…did you see them?”

“Not as clearly as you did, it seems, but I kept seeing glimpses. That was the airbending stuff you’ve been teaching me, isn’t it? I understand now why you had so much trouble trying to explain it. While it was happening, it seemed so very obvious that of course you had to move that way just then. If I can manage to hold on to any of that feeling, I think our practices will be much more productive from here on out.” Harry moved to stand beside Aang and rested a hand on one shoulder and squeezed gently.

“Did they say anything?”

“Just goodbye.”

Katara and Sokka moved forward to stand with them.

“Aang?” Katara said quietly, her voice questioning.

“Didn’t you two see them?”

“See who, Aang?”

“The airbenders…all of them who lived her at the Southern Air Temple…they were dancing with us tonight. I think they were dancing at all the temples, and then they came to say goodbye and let me know they don’t hate me.” Aang finished in a whisper.

Aang took a deep breath and let it out slowly and then wiped his cheeks while straightening his shoulders.

“There’s something I need to do.”

So saying, he turned and headed deeper into the temple. The rest of them shrugged and followed him.
When Aang eventually stopped, he was standing in front of two massive doors that towered over all their heads, which were sealed with a complicated looking mechanism that was probably twice as tall as any of them.

“Aang?”

“Monk Gyatso told me that I was supposed to go in here and talk to someone.”

“Aang…it’s been a hundred years. I don’t think anyone could have stayed alive in there all this time.” Katara reminded him gently.

“What is this place anyway? You never did tell us.” Sokka asked.

“It’s the avatar sanctuary.”

“Ah. I had wondered if there was any mystical avatar-y stuff you were supposed to do. Do you have the means to unlock the door? None of us was able to open it.”

“The key is airbending.”

Aang gathered wind to both his hands and shot it into the two horns that rested on the door, at the ends of a complicated, swirling tube mechanism. The shooting wind traveled through the tubes and flipped the three large latches in the center of the swirling tubes. The doors—which were gargantuan behemoths of metal, swung open silently into a darkened room.

“People!” Katara gasped.

“No…statues. Look how many there are!” Sokka disagreed.

“Hey, this one is an airbender.”

“And this one is a waterbender…and earthbender…firebender. That’s the avatar cycle. Aang…these must be your past incarnations!” Katara realized.

“Wow…there’s so many of them.” Aang whispered, a bit stunned.

The statues, hundreds of them, traveled in a twisting line up into the gloom at the far distant rooftop of the temple, alternating through the elements, and alternating between male and female.

“Sokka, Katara, come on. We’ll wait outside…” Harry announced as he felt the prickle on the back of his neck that seemed to indicate the avatar’s power was rising.

Aang had fallen into a trance while standing in front of the last statue in the cycle.

He saw Katara about to grab Aang and reacted without thinking, grabbing her hand and spinning her into her brother.

Katara bristled indignantly and opened her mouth to ream Harry out, but she faltered beneath his furious glare and sharp gesture for silence. When he was certain she wasn’t about to start screaming he made a ‘shooing’ motion and hustled the two of them out of the sanctuary ahead of him.

When they reached the doorway, Harry quickly put up a ward to keep sound from traveling into the sanctuary—just in time, as Katara whirled on him in a fury the moment they crossed the threshold.

“JUST WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING? HOW DARE YOU!”
“Just what the hell did you think you were doing? He’s supposed to talk to someone…and when he starts to you try to jolt him out of his trance? What if it’s a one-time only deal? What if his past incarnations have important information to impart? It would all have been lost because you decided to give Aang a good shake right when the process was beginning!” Harry growled back.

“Something weird was happening! It’s probably a Fire Nation plot!”

“I know the feel of the avatar’s power. This room was locked, by an airbender-specific lock, and has been since the airbenders were massacred. Listen well Katara, the next time Aang needs to do something mystical and avatar-y…don’t interfere!”

“Urgh! I don’t have to listen…to…is that a bell?”

Harry held up a hand to halt further talk and listened.

“Yes, it is. Someone’s coming.”

“Coming? Coming where? What are you talking about?”

“Sokka and I found the passageway Fire Nation used to get up here. I put up an alarm to signal if any ships entered the hidden dock at the base of the mountain. That’s what the bell is. It takes about an hour, hour and a half to trudge up here that way…though it should take them considerably longer since I trapped the passageway every few feet. That gives us a little time. Sokka, get Appa saddled and ready. Katara, pack up our stuff and any food you can scrounge, but do it quickly. Hopefully, Aang will be done his avatar thingy before we have to leave.”

“And what are you going to be doing, Mr. not-the-boss-of-me?”

“Obviously I’m going to fly down and see if I can scrounge maps and information from the ship, and I’m going to see if I think I can drive it. My traps will ensure they pay for every step they take up this mountain…taking their ship will ensure they get stuck here, for a little while at least, so they’re unable to follow us when we leave. Get moving, both of you; we don’t have much time.”

As they went running out of the temple to head their separate ways and get ready to leave, the hair on Harry’s arms stood up and the back of his neck prickled. “What the…”

A huge beam of white light was shooting out of the top of the center spire of the temple, reaching to the sky. The spirit—whatever its name was—that the avatar channeled could be felt like a huge, crouching presence all around them. He knew, without knowing how he knew, that all the elemental temples across the world were also lighting up. The whole world would soon know that the avatar had returned.

“I knew it was a bad idea!” Katara growled as she smacked him in the arm.

“Good idea or not, I get the feeling the spirit wanted this to happen…and we’ve already been found, so it hardly matters at this point. Let’s move. That light show is probably going to bring in any other ships that are in the area that aren’t here already. Move out!”

Harry disillusioned himself as soon as he hit the clouds beneath the temple and then pointed his broom nearly straight down.
He didn’t see any ships down below, so whatever had arrived was probably in the hidden dock already. That would make things both easier and harder—easy, because they wouldn’t see him coming, harder, because he couldn’t see them either, and wouldn’t until he entered the cave.

He slowed his approach as he neared the cave and dropped down slowly to peek inside. There was only one ship inside, a (relatively) small one—the same one that had kidnapped Aang, if he wasn’t mistaken. Maybe he had overestimated how high a priority finding all of them was—or maybe this particular group was just canny enough to figure out where they were hiding. Whatever the case was, they couldn’t be allowed to follow them.

A quick hominin revelio let him know there were six guys still on the ship—it was a small boat, they probably had a crew of six for the day and night shifts. So, one group had been left with the ship, the rest had gone upwards.

If he listened closely, he could hear the soldiers cursing and stumbling into one another as they tried making their way up the staircase. Harry couldn’t help the smug smile that crossed his face. He did hope they appreciated his handiwork; it had taken a long time to trap up the whole staircase.

Harry landed on the deck with barely a thump to betray him to the men below decks. He quickly stowed away his broom and created two shadow clones—both of whom appeared already disillusioned.

No words were needed; they already knew what needed doing. The two clones spirited away with barely a whisper of sound, and a ripple of bending light to betray their presence. While the clones went after the men, Harry himself made his way to the bridge—any maps or communications should be there, as should the controls for the ship. He really hoped the Fire Nation navy believed in idiot-proof controls—he’d never driven a ship before.

“Hey…what’s going on? Are we going somewhere?”
“Aang! Thank goodness…we have to leave. Fire Nation is on its way up.”
“Fire Nation? But, how did they find us?”
“They probably realized no one had found us or even seen us so far, and realizing it was really the only place we could be. We knew it was going to happen sooner or later. Harry rigged up an alarm and trapped the tunnel leading up here, so we had plenty of warning. He’s down there now stealing the ship.”
“Stealing the ship? But why…we have Appa!”
“So they can’t follow us. Come on, we need to get packed up and get off the mountain before they get up here.”
“I’ll be right back. I want to make sure the library and the avatar sanctuary are both locked down. It’s bad enough those guys are coming up here…I’m not letting them roam around this place any more than I can help.”
“Alright, just hurry up.”

Aang came running back a few minutes later with his new pet lemur, Momo, who’d they’d found living in the temple garden, riding on his shoulder.

“It’s a good thing I went back, we almost left Momo behind!”

BOOM!
“Ah!”
“It’s them, come on!”
“They just blew up part of the mountain!”

“Whoever made the tunnel resealed the end on this side. I don’t know what Harry did in the tunnel, but they sound pretty desperate to get away from it.” Sokka cackled as he climbed up to Appa’s saddle. He gave Katara a hand up, as Aang got on Appa’s head and took the reins.

“AVATAR!”

“Sounds like angry jerk with a ponytail is back. Let’s get out of here.”

“Prince Zuko…an owl just gave me a message.”
“What? What are you talking about? UGH Just give it here.”
“ARRRRRRGGGGHHHH! Quick, everyone back down the tunnel!”
“What did it say?”
“Thanks for the SHIP!”

“Appa, yip, yip!”

“Yeah, that sounds like our cue to leave. Heh, Harry. Geez, I love that guy…in a completely platonic, manly way of course.”

“Of course.”

As they dropped down through the cloud layer, they could see the small Fire Nation ship cutting a swath through the surrounding ocean. The kids all cheered—they had struck a blow against Fire nation and hindered any pursuit in one fell blow.

Appa groaned and settled down on the deck of the ship, while trying to make himself comfortable.

“Just for a little while, buddy. You’ll be in the air again soon enough.” Harry called out to him as Aang, Sokka and Katara slid down his tail to enter the ship.

“Should we all just be hanging out like this? That light show probably drew every Fire Nation ship in southern waters this way.”

“I realize that, but we need to make plans since we left in such a hurry, plus I found some things among the dispatches that everyone needs to be aware of.” Harry replied while leading the way to the bridge.

“It seems we’re not far from the southern headquarters for the Fire Nation navy. That part is bad enough. What’s worse is that one of the naval commanders, Commander Zhao seems to be turning most of the ships in his command to patrolling these waters for us. The commander in charge of this ship is Prince Zuko of Fire Nation. He’s the crown prince, but he’s been banished.” Harry explained as he unrolled a worn but still ornate scroll across the table.

“I found this in his quarters. It’s the terms of his banishment. He’s been on this ship looking for you, Aang, for three years. He’s an outcast, without honor, and no longer part of the succession for the throne of Fire Nation, unless he can find you and bring you to the Fire Lord. What that means is that we’ve only bought ourselves a little bit of breathing room. The prince’s future rests on him capturing and subduing you, which means we will be seeing him again—and with this commander Zhao looking for us all over these waters, all the prince and his men really have to do is light a signal
beacon and someone will be along before too long to investigate—which means we’ll be seeing him soon unless we can throw them off our trail.”

He pulled another pile of dispatches towards himself and tapped a finger down on them meaningfully.

“There’s good news as well. You said the men of your tribe were off helping Earth Kingdom fight the war, right? Well, guess what? This ship has been getting regular updates on the most recent troop movements of the Fire Nation army and navy, and has a list of their bases, strongholds and supply depots. Information like this would be invaluable to your father and his men. I want you two to write a letter to your father explaining about what all the information I’m going to send them is about, so they know to trust the source. I’ll package up what I think will be useful to them and we can send it all off with Hedwig. They’ve gotten a good look at her too, so if anyone is scanning for sight of her, it will help further confuse our trail, which is all to the good. After Hedwig leaves with the stuff for your dad, I’m thinking we head to the next nearest inhabited island with all speed, which would be this place here—Kyoshi island. We can gather supplies, maybe sell some of the stuff from the ship, have a few conversations where people can hear us about how we’re heading to this place here…Chin village. Once out of sight of the island, we hightail it in the opposite direction, and head up the coast of Earth Kingdom to here…Gaoling. According to all the maps and dispatches I’ve looked at, there is no Fire Nation presence there, and it’s remained untouched by the war thus far. We’ll have to get ourselves some Earth kingdom clothing so we’ll blend in, which will further obscure our presence to anyone searching for us. Aang…I hate to ask it of you, but you’ll need to grow out your hair, at least until you’re done training. The bald head and the arrow are pretty distinctive.”

“I’m not going to hide who I am!”

“Until you’re finished your training, and there’s a whole fleet searching for us, yes you are. You’re not ready to face anyone yet, and until you are, leaving an easy trail to follow will just bring down soldiers on everyone whose path crosses ours. When your training is complete and you’re ready to do what you must, you can do so as yourself in your people’s traditional clothing.”

Aang still looked unhappy but he nodded agreement.

“So, was there anything important you learned during your mystical communion with the spirits that we should know?”

“Huh?”

“The avatar sanctuary.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yes, that.”

“I was talking to my past incarnations…some of them anyway. There’s a lot of them. Avatar Roku, my last incarnation, told me there’s a comet coming at the end of the summer that will superpower all the firebenders. He said I need to defeat the Fire Lord before that happens. He said the last time the comet appeared was a hundred years ago…”

“When the air nomads were wiped out.” Katara said quietly.

Aang nodded, his eyes shadowed.

“Did they say anything else?”

“Roku wants me to contact him again so he can tell me more about the origins of the conflict…then I
woke up and realized everyone was getting ready to leave.”

“Done. Are you sure your owl can find our dad?” Sokka announced while handing the letter he and Katara had just written.

“What’s his name?”

“Chief Hakoda.”

“Hedwig?”

Hedwig clacked her beak at Sokka and ruffled her feathers.

“That’s a ‘hell, yeah’, in case you were wondering.” Harry laughed, while putting together several of the maps and dispatches he’d gone through earlier and putting them in a message pouch he’d put together that was larger inside than out, so Hedwig could carry everything they were sending without being overburdened.

“You be careful now, hear? Someone might try to shoot you out of the air or hit you with fire, so keep watchful.”

Hedwig hopped to Harry’s shoulder and nipped at his ear.

“Ow. That was completely unnecessary.”

Hedwig turned her face away from him.

“I know you’re awesome, I’m just saying that these guys might not play fair. Just be careful.” Harry smoothed the feathers on her breast, and she unbent enough to nip gently at one of his fingers, showing he was forgiven for doubting her, before taking off in a flurry of wings.

“That should do for now, I suppose. If I do get blocked or surrounded by the armada, don’t worry about me, just continue on to Kyoshi Island. I can catch up by broom, and I’ll set this ship to blow, which should buy us a bit of time at least.”

“Is that safe?”

“I should be safe enough. Like I said, don’t worry, I’ll catch up.”

“Well…okay then. Are you sure you can run the ship by yourself?”

“If we were doing more than a straight run to Kyoshi island, no, but since we are, it should be fine. If it does become a problem I’ll just abandon it and catch up to you earlier—so long as the ship is away from where those guys can get it, that’s good enough.”

“Well…alright then, if you’re sure. I guess we’ll see you on Kyoshi island.”

“Looks like my time has run out.”

The Fire Nation navy really was much more organized than he’d hoped they would be. He’d been careful, taken an evasive route from the Southern Air Temple, but somehow the armada was already organized enough that they’d surrounded him. His clones, which had stayed hidden below while the
gang was onboard, had been systematically going through the whole place to grab anything that looked remotely useful before rigging the ship up to blow on command. He whistled to let them know it was time and got himself ready to flee. His tent, which was opened up and sitting inside the bridge with him—a perfect holding place for stolen loot—was quickly collapsed and stuffed back away in his belt pouch, his broom extracted and readied for flight.

“Alright guys, you know what to do.” He told the clones, who saluted him rather ironically before hurrying off to their stations—one below to trigger the explosions, one above to steer the ship in Harry’s absence.

Harry hit himself with a disillusionment charm and flew straight up and then pointed his broom towards Kyoshi island, still some distance away. The clones turned the ship towards the slowly tightening ring of Fire Nation ships and started forward, full throttle as though trying to escape the cordon. The two ships they aimed for started drawing closer together to cut off their escape route. Harry I dispersed—the ship would keep going forward, whether or not he was there to steer. Harry II dispersed a minute later, right after starting the chain reaction that would blow the whole ship.

“Sir! A ship!”

Prince Zuko stirred himself from his restless slumber and peered around blearily, not remembering for a moment how he came to be in a cave, lying on the hard ground, hungry tired, and cold, with the sound of the ocean nearby. It all came back to him in a rush—his epiphany about the location of the avatar, their push to get to the Southern Air Temple, the long, nightmarish journey up the staircase, only to finally arrive in the temple, and to discover their quarry had fled and taken their ship. They were stranded…but wait.

“A ship you said?”

“Yes sir”

Zuko hurriedly made his way to his uncle’s side and shook him awake.

“Uncle, come on, a ship is coming. The signal fires worked.”

He felt a brief flare of guilt when his uncle stirred and stiffly climbed to his feet. He was retired; he should be off somewhere warm, flirting with girls and drinking tea, playing pai-sho and trading confusing proverbs with other old men. Instead, he was stuck sailing around the world with his honorless nephew, and sleeping in caves. He quashed down the guilt and hurried after the soldier that had awakened him to see who was approaching.

“Sir…it looks like commander Zhao’s flagship.”

“Zhao” Zuko hissed as flames shot out of both his hands. “Agni, I hate that guy. If he thinks he’s marrying my sister, stealing my father and my throne, he’s sadly mistaken.”

“Uh…sir? I think those visions were tricks. Some of the men were talking about it and well…we think the spirits of the dead Air Nomads have been haunting this place seeking revenge.”

“If I wish your input, soldier, I will ask for it.”

“Yes sir”

“They’re sending out a rescue boat, sir. We’re saved!”
"Is everyone here?"
"Yes sir, all present and accounted for."

"We shall have to remember to thank commander Zhao for his timely rescue, nephew." Iroh warned, his voice jovial. "I do hope he has some of that lovely ginseng tea on hand. It has been three days and I'm feeling rather melancholy without my usual evening cup."

"We have more important things to worry about than tea, uncle! We must find out the status of the search for the avatar!"

"That too of course." Iroh agreed cheerfully. "But as I always say, nephew, all things look better after a nice cup of calming tea."

Zuko passed on the chance to make a snarly rejoinder to focus on the rescue boat that was just pulling into the hidden harbor.

"What is the status of the search for the avatar?"

Zuko and the men with him stirred uneasily at the grim faces of the sailors on the boat.

"We lost a lot of good men, and the avatar is nowhere to be found."

"Was there a battle?" Iroh demanded.

"No sir. The avatar rigged a ship full of explosives and sent it after two of our ships. It was a small ship, so it did a lot of damage right by the water line. Some of our men were killed in the explosion...a good many more drowned in the icy water before they could be rescued. We saved what we could, but we took heavy losses."

Zuko and the men hung their heads, a moment's respectful silence for the dead.

"May Agni preserve and keep them." Iroh sighed.

Zuko's hands slowly clenched. They had blown up his ship. His ship. He hated that ship—a stark reminder of his banishment every time he looked upon its metal walls or heard the deck clanking beneath his feet...but it was also the only home he'd known for the last three years.

It was all his fault. He had brought them here, only to be trapped, his ship stolen. It had honestly never occurred to him that they might pull something like this—why take his ship, after all, when they could fly?

"The air nomads seem to have learned to fight dirty in the last hundred years." Iroh mused.

The two marines on the rescue boat looked at Iroh like he had a few screws loose; Zuko shifted uneasily.

They'd all learned in school that the air nomads had a huge army of vicious warriors that were planning to descend on the Fire nation like a plague of locusts, destroying everything in their path. The reality of the temple they'd spent the last few days in told a different story. The entire temple couldn't have held more than two hundred people comfortably for any length of time. It was a place of gardens, open halls for meditation and practice, and the murals and decorations depicted a people who valued freedom, and held a profound reverence for life. There were no armories, no weapons depots, no evidence of warlike intent whatsoever—and the other air nomad strongholds were the same way. They had been an entire race of monks and nuns---pacifist monks and nuns at that.
It was a very different picture than what he’d grown up being told in lessons before his banishment; a fact that didn’t sit easily with him. He had ended up retreating down to the dock to wait for rescue because he’d ended up feeling too uneasy up in the temple; the silence seemed accusing.

His men said nothing, about Iroh’s musings and didn’t react, beyond slanting a sideways look at the retired general. His words were skirting the edges of treason since the official story was that the genocide was to protect the people of Fire Nation from them. It was all very well for the brother of the Fire Lord to go around entertaining such thoughts; none of them were important enough to get away with even the suggestion they were considering it.

Zuko shook off his dark musings and got his men moving. The sooner they had another ship and were back underway, the better.

“‘You’ll not escape me long, Avatar.’”

“Whoa!”

Harry had only the merest split-second warning before the area was filled with girls in kabuki make-up and armor, wearing long green-dresses and carrying fans, who swarmed and surrounded him. He managed to evade the first attack, but there was a half dozen of them at least and they worked well together. He was too busy twisting and dodging their attacks to question them, or even wonder why they were attacking in the first place. He managed to send two of the girls crashing into each other and got some space, and then waved his arms in front of him to send out a gust of air that sent the remainder tumbling back—he’d spent his time in the air temple adapting some of Aang’s air tricks to magic. He might not be an actual airbender, but he could fake it well enough to anyone who didn’t know better.

“Could I ask why you ladies are attacking me?”

“We thought you might be a Fire Nation spy…but you’re an airbender.”

“I’m just looking for my friends. If all went well they should have arrived a short time ago.”

One of the girls, who had a slightly more ornate helmet than the rest, stood and put away her war fans.

“No offense, but we have to check. What are your friends names?”

“Sokka, Katara and Aang.”

The girl nodded, waved her team to stand down and then gestured for him to follow her.

“They arrived yesterday. We gave them lodgings in town. Were you really off battling the Fire Nation army single-handedly?”

Harry couldn’t help it, he started laughing. “Nothing so grand as all that. I just rigged up the ship I was on to blow up when the armada tried to cut me off. That’s a bit different than ‘battling the whole army single-handedly’.”
After some walking, they arrived at a small village of houses with steeply sloping roofs—it was in some ways strangely reminiscent of Hogsmeade. Appa was lying in the town square while several people brushed him. He could see Katara walking among the stalls of the market choosing vegetables. In the distance, Aang was surrounded by a group of little girls who all seemed to be gazing at him adoringly while he showed off some trick or other.

“HEY! Why aren’t you tied up? That’s not fair!”

Harry turned his head and found Sokka heading towards him from between two buildings. Momo was on his shoulder and they were both munching on some sort of fruit-filled roll.

“Because unlike you, I know how to talk to girls?”

Sokka spluttered indignantly and the warrior girls all giggled, which just seemed to upset Sokka more.

“Nice dress, by the way.”

Sokka blanched and then crossed his arms in front of himself as though that would hide him from sight.

“I think the ladies pull it off better, but it’s not a bad look for you really.”

“Oh shut up!” Sokka growled. Just as quickly as it had flared, his temper cooled and he slumped in place.

“They captured all of us in like, a minute, tops. I asked them to train me.”

“Good idea. I’m sure you could learn a lot from them, they’re quite skilled. You shouldn’t take is so badly though, Sokka. You’ve only been seriously training for about two weeks now. You have a lot of potential. I’m sure you’re going to be a force to be reckoned with one of these days.”

Sokka straightened from his slump, smiled and threw his shoulders back proudly.

“Now…whether that happens before the war is over is anyone’s guess…but someday.”

Sokka glared at him while all the warrior girls started giggling again.

“Come on, we should make plans for our trip to Chin village.”

“I thought you were all going to Gaoling. That’s what the avatar said.”

Harry and Sokka both sighed and smacked themselves in the forehead. “AANG!”

Aang glanced up from where he was entertaining the group of little girls and smiled brightly before bouncing over to greet them.

“Sifu! You’re here and you’re alright! How did your battle against the Fire Nation go?”

“Aang…all I did was blow up the ship and send it careening into two others; I wasn’t ‘battling’ anyone. Now, why are you going around telling people we were going to Gaoling? What part of the plan did you not understand?”

“There was a plan?”
Sokka groaned and palmed his face again, and Harry sighed. “Yes, Aang, there was a plan. We’ll have to go somewhere else now.”

“Oh! We can go to MMMPH!”

Harry stared at Aang until he was sure he wasn’t going to speak further, and then removed his hand from over his mouth.

“No talking. No mentioning details of where we’re going. The good people of this village can tell any pursuit, truthfully, that we were here and then left and they have no idea where we’re going. Understand?”

Aang nodded, looking shamefaced and hung his head, just as the sun came out from behind a cloud and glinted off his bald head.

Harry’s eyes narrowed and he ran a hand over Aang’s head. It squeaked.

“You shaved your head this morning.”

“Well…yeah. I shave my head every morning.”

“I told you to grow out your hair.”

“I thought that was just for when we had Earth Kingdom clothes.”

“Aang, hair doesn’t grow out overnight. As it is, it would barely have started to come in by the time we got anywhere. It’ll take even longer now. I was content to just let it happen naturally, but you asked for it.”

Harry smacked Aang in the forehead with his palm, while simultaneously casting a hair growth charm through the hidden wand strapped to his wrist.

“AAAHHHH!”

“You’re a hair bender!”

“Uh, yeah…that’ll work. Come on, we should get going.”

Aang and Sokka hurried off to get their things and grab Appa. Harry made to follow them but then hesitated and turned back.

“There are a lot of people looking for us right now. If we bring any unwelcome attention down on you, it wasn’t our intention and I apologize. If anyone does come asking questions, feel free to answer them. If the guy asking questions is an angry looking guy with a burn mark that covers half his face and a ponytail, it should be safe enough. His only interest is in finding us. If you tell him we’ve left, he should just leave you alone. If it’s someone else, be wary, because they might attack this place just because they can. I couldn’t really say for sure. The Fire Nation navy is all over these waters, so chances are someone will be along sooner or later. It might be best to spread the word among the civilians to evacuate if you give the signal.”

“We’ll tell the elder what you’ve said.”

Harry bowed slightly and then ran to catch Appa before he took off.
“You’re riding with us?”

“I was steering the ship most of the day and then flying over the cold ocean for a few hours and then I fought a short battle with those warrior girls. Yeah… I’m riding with you.”

“Bye, Aang! Come back and see us someday!”

Sokka heaved a despondent sigh.

“What’s up with you?”

“I would’ve liked to have had more of a chance to talk to Suki.”

“Suki?”

“Captain of the Kyoshi warriors. She’s who I was training with.”

“Ah. Speaking of the Kyoshi warriors… you might want to change out of that outfit… or not. I suppose it might pass elsewhere in Earth kingdom, although people will probably still look at you oddly.” Katara snickered.

“Oh man! I can’t believe I forgot I was wearing a dress!” Sokka wailed as he started scrambling out of his clothes. The rest of them had a good laugh as Aang turned Appa towards the mainland.

“Next stop, Omashu!”

“Omashu?” Katara asked, bewildered.

“Well… I sort of told everyone we were going to Gaoling, so we have to go somewhere else. I know Omashu; I used to go there all the time to see my friend Bumi.”

“Uh… unless there’s earthbenders in this city, I don’t think it’s a good idea, Aang.” Katara cautioned.

“No worries then. The whole mail system is run by earthbending.”

“Okay, so we just stop every mailman we see and ask ‘hey, do you want to be the Avatar’s earthbending teacher? He needs to send a message to the Firelord, fast.’”

Harry and Aang both laughed, while Katara groaned at Sokka’s bad joke.

“Steady on men, we’re almost there. Does everyone remember the plan?” Chief Hakoda of the Southern Water Tribe demanded.

“If anyone doesn’t they’re going to have to wing it… we’re here.” Bato, Hakoda’s second in command pointed out.

“You and your men best not let us down. I don’t know why we ever agreed to this crazy plan.” Hakoda sighed.
“Strong reinforcements with good reason to fight, as well as a more general blow against Fire Nation—one that should hopefully bring us a lot of gain with few casualties. Just be ready to move when it’s time. The whole plan hinges on timing.” Chang, a captain in the Earth Kingdom army grumped back.

The men scrambled to form up into position as the gangplank began to lower.

“Steady…steady.” Hakoda whispered.

As the gangplank hit the deck of the metal barge, they could see an official and a contingent of guards heading towards them.

“What’s the meaning of this? We weren’t expecting any prisoner transports today.”

“Big rebellion. There were a lot of captives, enough so it was thought best to just bring them straight here before they could cause further trouble.”

“Let me see your orders. This is most irregular.”

Hakoda stepped forward and pulled a scroll from his belt with one hand, while he signaled behind his back with the other.

He and the rest of the front rank, all of whom were dressed as Fire Nation soldiers, dropped down and hit the deck, just as several large boulders shot out of the ship and mowed down the official and the soldiers with him. The boulders smashed as they hit the metal deck and skittered across it among the feet of the dozens of captives that were there.

Hakoda and his men rolled to their feet and started running as a group of earthbenders came pouring out of the ship after them, more boulders at the ready.

“Rise up, brothers and defend yourselves! Strike a blow against tyranny and for freedom!”

The captives just stood there, faces uncertain, postures slouched, too broken by their imprisonment to make a bid for freedom when it was offered. A bender needed contact with their element to function long term. Out here, on metal barge surrounded by ocean for miles, with not a speck of Earth to be seen, the prisoners had gone into a decline.

Hakoda and his men cursed and spread out to try to help their allies take down as many soldiers as they could—they had to win here and get everyone back on the ship and away, or they’d just all end up as prisoners here.

“STAND AND FIGHT, DAMN YOUR HIDES!”

One of the captured earthbenders saw a gout of flame coming his way and used some of the shattered rock to block it. He stood there, frozen, for a long moment and trembled in place, until finally, with a great shout he sent a shower of rock at some of the oncoming soldiers and knocked them back. He shook himself and looked around, like he was waking from a long nightmare.

Others among the captives, who had begun to perk up just a bit from all the earth now scattered nearby, upon seeing one of their own seize on the chance for freedom, began to follow his example and fight back.

Bato whistled to signal the retreat. The water tribe men went first, as there were no benders among them—they were fighting with spears and clubs and stolen swords and knives. The Earth Kingdom resistance fighters split into groups, half of which began rounding up the prisoners and chivvying them onto the stolen ship, half of which put up stone walls to block the attacks of the Fire Nation.
soldiers which were now coming hard and fast as the remaining warriors regrouped.

Hakoda and his men got the ship underway as soon as the last man was halfway up the gangplank. The prisoners, eager to see the last of the place, hurried up on deck and began raining boulders down on the prison barge as they escaped. As the gangplank closed and the ship began to speed up, the prisoners raised a cheer as a fountain of water erupted from the center of the barge, thanks to the combined effort of several earthbenders sending a boulder down through the barge and into the ocean below.

“Here we are! The Earth Kingdom city of Omashu!”

“A city we should have been at days ago. While I certainly appreciated the many natural wonders this world boasts…we really should try to stay focused.” Harry chided.

“I can’t believe it…look at the size of this place. We don’t have any cities like this at the South Pole.” Sokka marveled.

“Come on, the real fun is inside the city!”

“Aang, hold on. It could be dangerous. Even though you have hair, well, someone might still realize you’re the avatar.” Katara cautioned.

“So what am I supposed to do? Wear a mustache?”

“Actually, I think that’s a good idea. In fact…” Sokka mused while running his fingers through Appa’s fur. “I think I even know how we can disguise you.”

Harry kept his sigh to himself—he didn’t want to stand too much in the way of innovation on the part of his erstwhile teammates after all, but he couldn’t imagine that anyone looking at Aang would see an old man, and not just a kid with a pile of bison fur tied around his head and glued to his lip.

“There! Now you look just like my grandpa.”

“Well…Aang is technically a hundred and twelve years old.”

“Right! So come on you young whipper-snappers! We’ve got a long walk to get to Omashu!” Aang wheezed in a passable old-man voice while using his glider as a staff. The set off down the road to Omashu, Aang in the lead, leaning on his glider, and pretending to be an old, decrepit man.

The road to Omashu was a zig-zagging road on top of a sheer drop off that meandered towards the mountaintop city. It was rather nerve-wracking, that road. All one could see as they approached Omashu was possible death by falling should you take one misstep, or should a stiff breeze catch you at the wrong time. There was no guardrail, and the sheer drop on both sides of the road made death by falling a very real possibility.

As they neared the end of the road, they could see the way was barred by a huge stone wall, many feet thick, that towered high overhead, and in front of it stood a trio of guards. Just ahead of them on the road was a man with a cart full of vegetables.
Aang’s steps quickened as their destination neared. “You guys are going to love Omashu! The people here are the friendliest in the world!”

“Rotten cabbages? What kind of a slum do you think Omashu is?”

The kids slowed to a halt and watched numbly as the vegetable cart was knocked off the sheer drop while the salesman wailed in dismay. “My cabbages!”

“Keep smiling.” Aang warned as he toddled forward.

“Hey, you there! State your business!” the guard warned, stomping his foot to raise a massive boulder from the ground, which he held over Aang’s head threateningly.

“You hold on there!” Aang wheezed in his old man voice. “The name’s Bonzu Pippinpaddle-Oppskopolis….the Thiiiird, and these are my grandchildren…why, I have half a mind to turn you over my knee…”

The guard reared back under the force of Aang’s old-man fury and let the boulder drop to the ground—it was heavy enough, Harry and the others actually felt themselves get lifted off the ground when it landed. They kept smiling, all the while wondering how they were going to get themselves out of this.

“Now now, settle down old fellow….and you are?”

“Ah…June Pippinpaddle-Opposkopolis at your service.” Katara answered immediately.

“Well, you seem like a responsible person. Make sure your grandfather stays out of trouble.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Welcome to Omashu.”

The massive wall in front of them split in half and began to draw apart. They started forward, all of them intensely aware of the weight of the stone all around them—stone that could draw back together and crush them in an instant with only a gesture.

“Hey…wait a second!”

Sokka tensed and threw Harry a panicked look as the guard put a hand on his shoulder to halt him and turned him back around to face him.

“You look like a strong young man! You both do! Show some respect for your grandfather and carry his bag for him!”

“Good idea!” Aang wheezed with a grin as he tossed his bag to Sokka and kept walking.

Sokka gave the guard a sickly grin and followed after.

“You’re going to do what?”

“Ride the mail system! I used to do it with my friend Bumi all the time, it’s great!”

“Yeah, I’ll pass.

“It’ll be fun!”
“I can do something similar every time I go to the bank back home, so it’s probably not as big a deal for me. I’ll see if I can acquire Earth Kingdom clothes for all of us, or at least find out how the war is going while you’re busy. I guess just find me after. Have fun.”

He waved to all of them, then resolutely turned his feet towards what looked to be the market district. He had a bad feeling about the whole endeavor, but he couldn’t hold all their hands forever, and well, Aang was twelve, and was expected to stop a hundred years war pretty much by himself. Looked at that way, he supposed he deserved as many chances as he could get to be an ordinary kid who did harebrained things because it sounded like a good idea—whatever. He wasn’t going to worry about it. It would be fine, he was sure. Maybe. Probably.

He had only just gotten to the market area and found the clothing shops when he knew something was wrong.

He didn’t know if it was the screaming, or the bits of rock exploding over the city that clued him in.

He watched numbly as Aang and the others went speeding by at high speed on a stolen stone mail cart, jumped tracks, crashed into other mail carts, skidded across a couple of rooftops, through a window, down another track, off another roof, and into a vegetable cart.

Aang, Katara and Sokka were led off by guards to the top of the mountain.

“Are you going to buy those sir?”
“I’ll be back. I think I hear my mother calling me.” Harry replied absently as he hurried off.

“Throw them…a feast!”

Harry sympathized with the head guard when he smacked himself in the face at the king’s words. While Harry could admit he was beyond relieved that his friends weren’t being hauled off to the execution block, he had to wonder what sort of punishment a feast was. There was something odd going on here. The old man on the throne had looked sharply at Aang when he spotted him, before settling back into ‘crazy old coot’ mode. Aang had lost his wig and moustache at some point during his wild ride, and even though he had hair, the arrow tattoo on his forehead was still clearly visible, as were the ones on his hands, and he was still dressed in his air nomad clothing. The king was old enough, he could well have been alive when there were still other air nomads in the world, and would know what to look for.

Though he wanted to snatch all of them up and get them out of the city post-haste, he was uncertain of his ability to do so without all of them being crushed by rocks along the way. His broom wouldn’t hold all of them. He supposed if worse came to worse, he could wait for a good moment to try sneaking them out of the palace, and then go fly to fetch Appa…

There was really no help for it, he was simply going to have to watch and wait for the proper moment to strike.

In spite of how mad his pronouncement was, the guards obeyed the king without question—none of them even seemed too worried or bothered, which simply increased Harry’s feeling that there was more going on than was readily apparent.

The three kids were led to a dining room and plates were set before them, piled high with chicken
“Uh, I don’t eat meat.” Aang apologized.

“No meat, eh?” The king mused as he picked up the chicken from Aang’s plate and stuffed it in Sokka’s mouth. “You look like a fellow that likes meat.”

Sokka mumbled incoherently around the chicken leg, and then set to eating. Katara nibbled at her own chicken, while casting worried looks the King and Aang’s way.

“Well…I should turn in. These old bones, you know…” the king mumbled. He made as though to rise and then chucked a chicken leg straight at Aang as though he were throwing a knife. Aang blanched and caught the thing in a ball of air, acting purely on reflex.

The guards all gasped and the king settled back in his seat with a look of satisfaction on his face.

“Well well well. It seems we have an airbender among us. What’s more, we have an airbender who’s also the avatar!”

In his spot in the corner where he was hiding under a disillusionment charm, Harry clenched his hands in concern. They still didn’t know whether the king was a friend or an enemy, or what his intentions were. The king ordered the three kids to be taken to a newly refurbished chamber and then ordered the guards to escort them.

Harry made to follow, so he could study the layout and plan their escape, when the ground beneath his feet surged up and pinned him in place. He and the king were the only ones left in the room.

“Show yourself, spirit. I am the king of this city and I have the right to know who walks the halls of my palace.”

Harry tried to loosen the stone around his feet but it was fighting him—or, he supposed, the king’s will was fighting him. Either way, he was stuck. With a resigned sigh, he removed the disillusionment charm.

“You would be the missing grandson, I assume?”

“Yes, that would be me. What are your intentions with my comrades? We don’t really have time to linger while they languish in prison—we came here to find an earthbending teacher so the avatar can complete his training and end the war that has raged across this world for a hundred years.”

The king studied him at length and then seemed to come to a decision.

“I’m going to test him and push him a bit.”

Harry and the king studied each other in silence a moment, then Harry had a sudden thought.

“You knew him a hundred years ago. Would you be Bumi, by any chance?”

The king smiled and chuckled to himself. “Ah, he mentioned me, did he?”

“Yes, he said he used to come here all the time to see his friend Bumi, the mad genius.”
“An apt description, if I do say so myself. Since you seem to be guiding him, I will be frank with you, spirit. I need to see for myself that Aang can actually do what is needed when pushed. It’s been a hundred years, and except for the hair, he hasn’t changed at all. He looks exactly as he did when we were children. Aang is a good person, with a good heart and good intentions…but he’s also an airbender; almost stereotypically so.”

“Pinning him down and making him focus is like trying to pin down a passing breeze.”

“Exactly. Were he an ordinary airbender, that would be no problem, but Aang is the avatar. He needs to find the heart of the four elements inside himself and strike the balance between them. I fear that will be very difficult for him—he is so much a creature of air, that finding the unyielding will of earth within him is going to be quite the job, I think.”

Harry thought back to the disaster that was ‘the plan’ when they were on Kyoshi island, and the flitting, roundabout route they took to get to Omashu and could only agree.

“What are you going to do, exactly?”

“Just some tests, with his friends lives seemingly at stake.”

“You’ll have to include me as a hostage. He’ll be waiting for a rescue otherwise. Sokka and I have been making most of the plans, and he’s content to let us worry about things and just go with the flow. Katara means well, but she tends to baby him and encourage his passive attitude. Unless he’s alone, with only himself to count on, he’ll just dither around, and wait for me to show up and take care of things.”

Harry dearly regretted his impulse to allow himself to be held captive and used as an object lesson when he found himself encased in a sheath of creeping crystal the following morning. It didn’t help much that Sokka and Katara were in similar straits, or that they kept looking at him with a faint sense of betrayal. It seemed Aang wasn’t the only one who’d been waiting for a heroic rescue.

The crystal was heavy and uncomfortable, but maybe it was all for the best—Sokka and Katara needed to find their own strength and their own will to fight; they couldn’t depend on him for everything. He would watch their backs and expect the same in return, but he wasn’t a miracle worker—he was just one guy, with a unique skill set and a lot of ideas, that was all.

So far Aang had passed all of Bumi’s tests—he’d freed a key from a waterfall, found Bumi’s pet, Flopsie (a monster gorilla-rabbit-thing. He thought Bumi would have gotten on well with Hagrid, back in his world. Hagrid too had a love of monstrous pets.)

The final test was to choose an opponent for a battle in an arena. They were led to a balcony high above the battle ground, and two fierce looking warriors were brought out.

“You may now choose your opponent. Choose wisely.” Bumi warned.

Aang looked between the two warriors and then pointed to the frail looking king. “You.”

“Bad choice.” Bumi replied gently.

He straightened from his hunched over posture and threw off his robes, revealing a body of sculpted, ropey muscle that would have been impressive even on a much younger man.

“I’m the most powerful earthbender you’ll ever meet.”
Aang gulped and looked frightened.

King Bumi was quite impressive. He lifted giant boulders with a wave of his hands and sent them flying like they weighed nothing. He sent spikes of rock up to foil Aang from beneath by just flexing his toes. Aang flipped and dodged and jumped and spun like a madman, but somehow Bumi was always a step or three ahead of him.

The longer the battle went on, the more convinced Harry was that Bumi had the right idea. Aang dodged, but he didn’t attack. He was stuck on the defensive, reacting to Bumi and pretty much handing him the battle. Aang was skilled, but he definitely had a ways to go before he was ready to face the Fire Lord.

Bumi began pushing Aang harder, trying to get him to fight back, but Aang stayed on the defensive.

“How like an airbender! Always trying to work around a problem! Well, dodge this!”

Katara gasped in fright as a boulder the size of a lorry lifted up to hang over Aang and then started falling. Aang squeaked and began running in a circle, whipping up a tornado and sending the boulder flying back to Bumi. Aang had finally been pushed hard enough to go on the offensive—he followed behind the boulder, which Bumi split to sail past on either side of him and hit him with a blast of wind while his guard was down.

Bumi went down, and Aang stood over him, staff at the ready.

Aang and the King rejoined the rest of them on the balcony. One of the guards handed the king his robe and he redressed himself.

“There is one more task before I let you or your friends go.”

“What! That’s not fair!”

One side of Sokka’s crystal covering shot up beside his head and overbalanced him, sending him crashing to the floor.

“Your friends are still depending on you.”

“Fine! I’ll do your stupid task!”

“What is my name?”

Aang studied his face and thought about the tests he’d been put through.

“BUMI!”

Aang’s whole face lit up with joy and he launched himself at the old man who smiled nostalgically as he embraced the small boy.

“It’s good to see you again, Aang. You haven’t changed a bit…except for the hair, that’s new.”

Bumi flexed his fist and the crystal prisons around all of them shattered. Bumi caught one of the crystal shards in his hand and took a big bite, crunching it up with every evidence of enjoyment.

“Gemomite is made of rock candy. Delicious!”
“Hey, Bumi, I have a challenge for you!”

“Oh?”

The rest of them could only watch in disbelief as Aang and the King ran off to go ride the mail chutes.

One of the guards who had been left behind with them cleared his throat to get their attention.

“His majesty ordered us to see you resupplied before you continue on your journey. I understand you’ll all be leaving us soon?” The look in his eyes indicated he really hoped that was the case.

“Yes, we’ll be leaving as soon as the avatar and his majesty finish what they’re doing.”

“Aang needs an earthbending teacher! We should ask Bumi if he’ll do it.” Katara realized.

“I already asked him. He said no.” Harry replied regretfully.

“He said no? But…Aang is the avatar! I thought they were friends!”

“He is and they are, however, Bumi is king of Omashu. From what he told me last night, Fire Nation is making a push towards Omashu. A large portion of the guard will be heading off with the next shipment of weapons to help bolster the front lines. Bumi is needed here, and he has neither the time nor the leisure to take on Aang’s training right now. Also, if it becomes known the avatar is here, he fears the Fire Nation will throw everything they have at them in order to get to him, which would simply result in unnecessary loss of life and damage to Omashu. He has to think of his people first.”

“But…”

“He’s right, Katara. We’ll just have to look elsewhere.”

“He suggested we head north or east—east is away from the where the war has touched so far. Northwards is mostly occupied territory, which has the benefit of being someplace no one would likely be looking for us, though he’s not sure we’ll actually be able to find an earthbending teacher out there.”

“So we head east, find a teacher and then north so Aang can practice.”

“That was actually my thought as well, if we can find a good spot to settle in. King Bumi did give me some leads on where to possibly find a teacher—he said there’s an earthbending academy in Gaoling, and also an underground fighting tournament known as the ‘Earth Rumble’. I imagine he’ll tell Aang the same while they’re riding the mail chute.”

“Well...looks like we're headed to Gaoling after all."
A kidnapping in Gaoling

Chapter Summary

Harry and the gaang head to Gaoling to look for an earthbending teacher for Aang.

Zuko tromped down the gangplank, accompanied by his men and marched into the center of the nearby village. It was a small village, filled with small houses with steeply sloped roofs, most of which were currently ablaze. The area was filled with Fire Nation soldiers, but otherwise seemed to be empty of all life.

“You there, report. Where is the Avatar?”

“Not here, Prince Zuko. He’d already been and gone by the time we arrived.”

“Then what happened here? Was there a battle?”

“No sir, Commander Zhao’s orders.”

“You’re all just wasting time that could be better spent elsewhere. Put out these fires and continue the search. Where are all the people of the village?”

“They fled before we arrived sir. We do have one prisoner. She came out to meet us.”

“Turn the prisoner over to me and then get going. I expect any further avatar sightings to be forwarded to me, not to commander Zhao. It is my job to find the avatar, Commander Zhao is supposed to be focusing on the rebel pirates attacking our ships and our bases. The sooner he returns to that, the better for all involved. Now get moving.”

“Yes sir.”

One of the soldiers hurried off to fetch the prisoner, while the rest put out the fires they’d just started and then marched off back to their ship.

Iroh sighed once they’d gone and looked around sadly at the ruined village.

“Such a foolish waste; Fire Nation wins no friends by such actions. There is no honor to be gained by recklessly destroying the villages of harmless civilians for no gain.”

“The prisoner, sir.”

“Thank you, lieutenant. You and your men are dismissed.”

Zuko turned around to face the prisoner and found a girl with heavy makeup, wearing a dress and armor.

“Oh, it’s you. Why couldn’t you have shown up earlier? I might have still had a village if you did.” The girl grumbled.
“Um…do I know you?”

“We’ve never met. You’re Prince Zuko, right?”

“Yes…and you are?”

“Suki. Leader of the Kyoshi Warriors.”

“How do you know my name?”

“That guy Harry said you’d probably be along before too long. He said when you showed up we could just tell you they’d already left and you’d leave us alone, but if someone else showed up first we should be prepared to evacuate because they’d probably burn down our village.”

She looked around at the houses, many of which had damage to their roofs from where they were set alight.

“You chased them off before everything completely burned down. Thanks for that.” she sighed.

“Uh, you’re welcome.” Zuko replied uncomfortably. “Some guy told you I was coming?”

“Yeah, I just said that. Why did it take you so long to get here?”

“Uh…Commander Zhao kept us pinned down at the base and was dragging his heels on supplying us with a new ship. My last one got destroyed.”

“Oh, right. Harry mentioned that. Hey, could you untie me? My arms are getting kind of stiff like this. Maybe you’re into this sort of thing, but I’m not.”

Zuko blinked, but Suki just stared at him expectantly. Finally, his shoulders slumped and he waved one of the men forward to cut her loose.

“The avatar.” Zuko rallied.

He wasn’t quite sure how he’d so completely lost control of the conversation, but it needed to stop now so he could continue his search.

“Like I said, they’ll all left a few days ago.” Suki replied while rubbing her wrists. “They were supposed to all talk about going to Chin village, but the avatar wasn’t paying attention and he told everyone they were actually going to Gaoling, so they decided they couldn’t go there. Harry covered his mouth so he couldn’t say where he thought they could go instead, so that’s all I know. Harry told us we should expect company, and if it was you, to feel free to just tell you. They left right after; they said the navy seemed to be more organized and out in more force than any of them were expecting. He hoped blowing up your ship would buy them some time.”

“I see. Thank you for your help.”

“Anytime. You should stop by again…without the troops, of course.”

Zuko stared at Suki blankly. “I’ll be busy hunting the avatar, but thank you for your kind invitation.”

Suki sighed, Uncle Iroh facepalmed, and the soldiers stared straight ahead with suspiciously blank faces.
“So, this is Gaoling…I’ve never seen so many people in one place before. It’s very…green.” Sokka said diplomatically.

“Let’s find someplace to leave Appa and then we can take a look around.” Harry suggested.

They left Appa in the hills to the southwest of the town, where he would be somewhat shielded from view and have plenty of greenery to munch on while he was waiting for them to return. There was even a bit of water in the area—just a small trickle, really, but enough for Appa to quench his thirst at least.

They took the time to clean up a bit and change into the earth kingdom clothing King Bumi had gifted them with before they left. When they met up again, they were all clothed in yellow and green. Bumi had included a headband for Aang, as well as a pair of wrist guards that covered the back of his hands—Harry and Sokka got a pair as well. He’d even included green beads and a green necklace to replace the ones Katara was wearing in her hair and around her neck.

“There…I’m sure we’ll fit right in.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“We should settle our cover story before we go into town.”

“Cover story? Why do we need a story? I’m the avatar and I’m here in search of an earthbending teacher.”

“Which would completely negate us dressing to blend. If anyone asks ‘where are you from?’ tell them we came from a village to the west—which is a true statement, but one which will mislead them to draw their own conclusions. If anyone asks why we’re in town, tell them you need an earthbending teacher, and all the earthbenders west of here are joining the army—both of which are again true, but misleading.” Harry suggested.

“Sounds good to me. Think you can remember that, Aang?” Sokka asked waringly.

“Yeah.” Aang grumbled in response.

“Good, let’s go then.” Katara said cheerfully.

“The Earth Kingdom city of Omashu. Are you sure your instincts were leading you correctly, Prince Zuko? We have only a small force. Even if the Avatar is here, it will be difficult to extract him.”

“I’m sure he came here, uncle. They didn’t go to Gaoling, because the avatar misspoke himself. They wouldn’t have headed west—while no one would likely be looking for them in occupied territory, they’d likely not have much luck finding an earthbending teacher either. If that’s not enough, I found in some old records when I first began my search that King Bumi of Omashu was friends with an airbender in his youth. Also, Omashu was where avatars traditionally went for training as it’s supposedly the origin of earthbending.”

“All sound reasons, but there is still the problem of getting into the city.”

“Leave that to me, uncle.”
Zuko set off down the open road to Omashu at a brisk march. He’d come all this way; he refused to leave without finding the avatar.

“You there, state your name and…oh, it’s you. Prince Zuko, right?”

Zuko stared at the guards blankly.

“Yes, yes I am.”

“Ah. The avatar isn’t here anymore. He left a few days ago. The front line of the war is headed this way, so his majesty refused his request to be his teacher.”

“Do you know which way they went?”

“Kid, I’m doing you a courtesy, since both the avatar and his group, and his majesty said it was alright to just tell you what you want to know since you would just leave afterwards. Our nations are still at war, so even if I knew where they were going next I wouldn’t tell you.”

“I see. Thank you.” Zuko replied while making a shallow, stiff bow. As he turned to leave, one of the guards stopped him.

“Oh, wait. This was left here for you.”

Zuko looked at the package he was being given, took it and turned to leave without another word.

He found his men and his uncle near the end of the road, and settled down beside Iroh.

“What have you there?” Iroh asked curiously.

“I don’t know. The guards gave it to me before I left. They said it was left there for me.”

He untied the knot opened the package. Inside was a familiar tea tin—one of uncle’s, from the ship, along with his tea pot and cups. He handed them over and uncle began immediately making tea. Underneath was a bunch of crystals. There was also a note.

Zuko opened the note and read it silently and then stared at the open package on his lap. After a long moment of silence he picked up one of the crystals and took a bite out of it.

“It’s not bad, but it’s not really the same.”

Uncle Iroh held out his hand for the note which Zuko handed over.

Iroh cleared his throat and read it out loud.

Sorry about your ship, but one does what one must. I must confess I ate your stash of candy before I set the explosives. It was good, but rather spicy for my taste. Here is some Omashu rock candy to make up for it. The tea is for your uncle. As a fellow tea-lover, I know how miserable it is to go for extended periods without. We’re off to our next stop—maybe we’ll see you there.

--Team Avatar
Zuko saw the men looking at the bag curiously, so he passed it around. Soon the sound of crunching filled their campsite.

“Ah…they have a connoisseur among their number. Obviously we shall have to start checking every tea shop in every city we travel to from now on. I will take care of that part of our search nephew.”

“Uncle, how is that different from what we’ve been doing? You stop in tea shops anyway!” Zuko spluttered.

“Yes, but now it will be for a two-fold purpose. That is different from what I have been doing thus far.” Iroh answered piously. He handed around small cups of tea to everyone, and they sat for a while drinking quietly.

“Let’s just get going. I want to travel as far as we can manage while it’s still light out. Men, start back to the ship and then make for Gaoling. Uncle and I will take the overland route. We’ll meet you there.”

“Come on, uncle, time is wasting.”

Iroh sighed, packed away his things and then heaved himself onto the komodo-rhino behind Zuko.

“Gaoling, you said?”

“It was their original destination. Now that they’ve found Omashu to be unsuitable, I’m certain they’ll head there next.”

“Well, you’ve been right an uncommon number of times lately, so perhaps you are this time as well. I guess we will see when we get there.”

“Hey, Aang. How was school?” Sokka greeted the younger boy.

“I don’t think he’s the right teacher for me. Bumi said I needed to find someone who listened to the earth and waited for the right moment to strike. That guy isn’t it.”

“Too bad, but no worries; we’ve still got the earth rumble to go to. Since it’s a battle tournament, it’s sure to draw a range of skilled people. I’m sure we’ll find you someone there.” Harry reassured him.

“And if we don’t?”

“If we don’t, well, there are other cities. I’m sure we’ll find someone sooner or later.”

“When is the earth rumble?” Katara wondered.

“In a few days. We bought tickets while we were out.”

“You seem to have bought a lot of things while you were out.”

“We sold some of the stuff I nabbed from the ship before I blew it up. We have some extra supplies
to supplement what King Bumi gave us, and we have money for later.”

“Great. I guess we should head back to Appa; I think we’re done here for today.”

The foursome made their way to the hills on the edge of town and set up camp for the evening. Sokka was all smiles as he handed over a fat fish wrapped in paper to Katara for the evening meal.

“You bought meat?”

“Don’t worry, we didn’t forget you, Aang. I also bought this.” Harry explained, showing him the container of tofu he’d picked up. “I know you’re a vegetarian, but you need protein in your diet as well. We get it from meat, you can get it from this.”

“We could all eat this.”

“No can do. It makes me sick, it’s not something used often where I’m from—much as you would likely get sick if you tried eating meat. It’s all what you’re used to sometimes.” Harry disagreed.

“You still shouldn’t eat meat, it’s wrong.”

“Aang, my man, maybe you can get by on just vegetables…I can’t.” Sokka objected. “I need meat.”

“But…”

“Aang. Stop for a second and think about the South Pole where Sokka and Katara live. What’s there?”

“Snow…ice…water…um…penguins.”

“And fish.” Harry agreed. “Are there groves of fruit trees?”

“Well, no, of course not.”

“Fields of grain? Rows of beans? Any vegetables?”

“There’s seaweed and sea prunes!”

“They’re not enough by themselves to provide all the necessary nutritional needs for the whole tribe all year long. Where I’m from, it’s not as cold or as snowy as the south pole, but it’s still pretty cold much of the time. It’s very mountainous, and for most of the year we’re all but buried under several feet of snow, then there’s a thaw and we have a short growing season, and then it’s back to the cold and the snow. My people are great meat eaters as well. Keep in mind Aang that most people in the world do eat meat, and don’t consider it wrong—just survival, or custom, or just what they’re used to. Your eventual role is to be the balance and the mediator between the various countries. You have a right to expect others to respect your vegetarian lifestyle…but in turn, you have to be willing to respect the customs and choices of the other nations as well.”

“But it’s just senseless killing.”

“Aang, I hate to break it to you, but that’s the circle of life.”

“The circle of life?”

“Yeah, everything is connected, and we’re all part of a great…cycle of being. I guess that’s a good way to put it. We eat animals, and when we die, we feed any number of insects, small animals,
carrion eaters. It’s not wrong, it’s just part of the cycle. I don’t know if anyone does anything like it here, but back where I’m from they have a game commission that keeps track of the large game animals in an area. Hunting is regulated, you see. Take deer, for example. They make estimates on how many deer can be taken out in a single season that will allow the deer herds as a whole to thrive. Food is scarce, as are safe places for the deer to roam. They try to make it so there will be enough food for most of the deer to survive the winter—and sometimes for that to happen, some of the deer need to die. There’s a balance to nature, but natural forces are very much a ‘big picture’ sort of thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well…um, take forest fires, for example. People hate them, because they endanger people and property, and oftentimes a lot of animals get severely injured or killed during them—the thing is, they’re a necessary part of the cycle.”

“How could a big, massive fire that kills people and animals be a good thing?” Sokka demanded.

“Plants leech nutrients out of the soil. If there isn’t some way to put new nutrients back, the soil becomes barren and nothing will grow there. Sometimes, the vegetation just gets so thick and so profuse, the plants are actually strangling and starving one another. They start to dry out, and eventually a fire starts, often from lightning, but sometimes by other means as well. Everything burns, but what it does in the end is clear away everything to make room for new growth, nourishes the soil and allows everything clear space to begin again. In fact, I read somewhere that there are certain plants that actually need a burn cycle before they can grow, because they’re in an area where fires are just part of what happens, and so they adapted, or perhaps just flourished, because they actually thrive in those conditions. I’m just saying. It’s something to think about. What worked for all of you in the air temples doesn’t work for people who live on an iceberg…and stuff that works for them wouldn’t work for folks that live in a swamp or on a volcano.”

“Oh, it’s you again. “

Zuko could feel the beginnings of a blush and fought it down with sheer will. After they’d left Kyoshi island and had been most of the way to Omashu, it had occurred to him that Suki might have been flirting with him—and everyone had known it but him. He’d gotten several annoying lectures, interspersed liberally with uncle’s most confusing proverbs, on the joys of a good woman in one’s life.

All that was bad enough, but now Suki was surrounded by a bunch of identical look alikes—and a whole bunch of refugees, but they were hard to concentrate on when confronted with an octuplet of identical warrior girls.

“Oh…hi.” He answered lamely once he realized he’d been staring at the girl blankly for too long.

“You’re quite the charmer, aren’t you?”

He could feel heat trying to creep into his face again as all the girls started giggling.

“Are you good people headed for Omashu?” Uncle asked curiously.

“Yes, we are. We’ve been neutral all this time, but now that the war has come knocking…and
partially burned down our village in the process…we thought it might be best to move elsewhere for a while. I’m guessing, since you’re here, that the avatar is not in Omashu?”

“He was there, but then he left again. The guard at the gate said the front lines are too close to Omashu and he and his group felt it would be best to head elsewhere.” He looked out over the crowd and saw a lot of old people and a lot of women with small children, and quashed down the inexplicable guilt that rose in him at the sight. Maybe his father and Azula were right, and he was just too soft. Things happened in wartime; he had nothing to feel guilty about.

“The war front has gotten that far?”

“That’s what I was told. I’ve been rather out of the loop on things.” Zuko admitted.

“Thanks for the warning; we’ll take it into consideration as we make our travel plans.”

As they were talking the group of refugees continued by, many laden down with packs or pulling small carts behind them. The land got more mountainous from here on out; all he could think was that they were going to have a difficult time lugging all that stuff with them through the windy canyons that threaded between the mountains.

“When are we going home, mommy?” A small boy whined as the group continued past.

“We don’t have a home right now.” The boy’s mother replied, before sending a hateful look their way.

Zuko could feel his shoulders hunching under that accusing stare, but he fought off the impulse and sat straight and proud.

“We should probably get going. It’s a long way to Gaoling.”

“And it’s still a long walk to Omashu.” Suki agreed.

Zuko made to get his rhino moving, but then he hesitated.

“Here. For the kids. It should keep them occupied when they get fussy.”

He untied the sack with what remained of the rock candy the avatar and his group had left him from his saddle—it was still mostly full; the stuff was sweet, rather than spicy like he was used to in his candy, so none of them had eaten very much of it.

“If you rap it sharply with the handle of a knife along the edges it breaks apart fairly easily, and the smaller pieces can be broken up further pretty easily from there….also, if you run chi through it, more will grow. I kind of discovered that by accident.”

He got the rhino moving as soon as the sack was in her hands.

He was pretty sure he could feel her eyes on him till they were out of sight down the road…or it might just have been uncle. He had a sneaking suspicion he was grinning at him.

“Earth rumble V, I can’t wait!” Sokka enthused as they entered the arena.
The arena was a large cavern, with rows of stadium seating rising around a platform in the center—all of it made of stone.

“Hey! Front row seats! I wonder why no one else is sitting here…” Sokka’s voice trailed off as a large boulder came sailing off the platform and smashed into the seats they were about to take.

“I think we should take our cue from the folks that are already here and find higher seats.”

“Good idea.”

They moved up a few rows and settled down.

“This is just going to be a bunch of muscle-men tossing rocks around, isn’t it?” Katara huffed.

“Yes, and that’s just what I want to see!” Sokka agreed cheerfully.

Katara sighed and slumped in her seat, prepared to be bored.

“Hey, something’s happening!”

A hole opened up in the center of the platform and a man popped out. He was large and muscle-bound.

“Welcome, one and all to EARTH RUMBLE FIVE! We have a good show for you tonight—the finest earthbenders to be found everywhere in the country are here tonight to try their luck…and whoever makes it to the end of the line will have a chance to battle our reigning champion, Rockalanche!”

The crowd went wild, clapping and stomping their feet.

“First up tonight, we have a new contender, making her earthbending debut. Please give a warm welcome to THE BLIND BANDIT!”

“It’s a little girl!” Katara hissed.

Indeed, the blind bandit was a little girl—she couldn’t have been more than ten or eleven, and she was tiny, though she boasted a pretty impressive muscular physique for her age and small size. She was dressed in a green shorts and shirt combination with a yellow tunic overtop, with green arm guards and spats—no shoes.

She was dwarfed by the platform…and by her opponent who was being announced—the Hungry Hippo, a giant of a man with a body made of thick slabs of muscle—the little girl came up barely to his knee.

“Someone needs to stop this! She’ll be killed!” Katara fretted.

“Relax…she doesn’t look worried.”

“She’s probably just too young and silly to realize what a bad idea this is!”

The Hungry Hippo stomped his way onto the platform and roared, and then stomped his foot, raising a large boulder from the ground which he grabbed in one hand and then took a bite out of, crunched up and then spit back out as gravel.

“LITTLE GIRL, YOU SHOULD BACK AWAY RIGHT NOW…HIPPO IS HUNGRY, AND
YOU’RE GOING TO BE MY NEXT MEAL!"

The girl cackled and widened her stance before laughing mockingly.

“Bring it on, lardbutt! The only thing you’ll be eating tonight is your words!”

The Hippo roared again and jumped, lifting two massive boulders when he landed, which he sent careening down the platform at the girl, who was again dwarfed by their massive size.

“Too easy.” The girl mocked, sending the boulders speeding away from her to either side with a flick of her fingers. She slid one foot forward and flicked her fingers again. The Hippo lost his balance and then was sent flying from the platform with a single, well-aimed column of stone. There was dead silence for a count of three and then the crowd roared.

The girl threw up her hands in triumph and laughed. “YEAH!”

“Winner! The Blind Bandit!”

“Aang…I think we just found your earthbending teacher.” Harry said with a grin. “Uh-oh, trouble at twelve o’ clock.”

“Um, Harry…it’s already after twelve…”

“Ah, cultural differences. I have to remember that. No, what I meant was, look straight ahead.”

“Ah crap. It’s angry jerk with a ponytail again. How does he keep catching up with us?” Sokka growled.

“Probably because, unlike us, he went directly from point A to point B.”

They all turned to look at Aang, who shrunk down under their combined glares.

“Alright, everyone settle down and be cool. We’re in disguise, so long as we don’t give ourselves away, he shouldn’t really notice us in the crowd.”

“Another match seems to be starting.” Katara noted.

“Good, let’s see if the Blind Bandit can keep up her winning streak.” Sokka rubbed his hands together gleefully.

Iroh stifled a sigh as he clamped down on his impatient nephew’s shoulder and steered him firmly towards the seats.

“You are not marching up onto the stage and interrupting the tournament. I do not want to flee a horde of angry earth benders who want to kill us for ruining their earth rumble…besides, up in the seats you will be able to see more of the crowd and conduct your search peacefully and quietly.”

“We’re wasting time, uncle. What if he’s already been here and gone? I have no idea where they might be headed next!”

“Patience nephew. Since the avatar reappeared you have only been a few steps behind him. Stay calm, and keep a rational head about you and all will be well.”
Zuko sighed impatiently and made to sit down, but his uncle tugged him up further.

“A bit higher, I think. I’ve been to one of these before—no one sits in the bottom seats for fear of being crushed by stray boulders…and before you say it, you would draw entirely too much unwelcome attention to us if you were to begin fire-bending them out of the way…if you even could before it impacted. You have, after all, never trained under such conditions, Prince Zuko.”

Zuko sat down with a huff and crossed his arms. He glanced without much interest at the stage, and then began to scan the audience for some sight of his quarry, only to turn back in disbelief at the mismatched pair. One opponent was tall and broad, with muscles on top of muscles; he looked more like a mountain than a man—exactly what you’d expect a master earthbender to look like. The other opponent was a tiny little girl.

He could feel his jaw dropping open in shock when the girl decimated her opponent in two moves, and then did it to the next muscle-bound man who came out and the next.

“Ah, a true master at work. You could learn a lot from that girl. Do I not always tell you that bending comes from the breath, not the muscles? This girl is a perfect case in point. See her move? No flash and bang, no wasteful movement—power and control. She is the master of her element and at one with it. Hopefully, when next you practice, you will listen more when I tell you to focus on your breath and remember your basics. Watch and learn, nephew—he wastes time on boasting and stomping around and making showy movements, she waits and listens and picks her moment to strike, then does so without wasting time or effort on the non-essentials.”

Zuko huffed and glowered—it was bad enough spending his whole life being compared unfavorably to his prodigy sister who was two years younger than him, without uncle making it worse by comparing him unfavorably to some pipsqueak earthbender on top of it.

The Blind Bandit cackled in obvious delight as the last of her opponents went crashing to the ground, then she threw up her arms to drink in the cheers and adulation of the crowd.

The emcee’s voice echoed over the crowd. “A brilliant display of earthbending from our newest contender…but can she go the distance? I present to you, your champion…ROCKALANCHE!”

The crowd began to cheer wildly and stomp their feet as a strange procession came into the hall. A man, wearing a green cape and a giant green and gold belt, seated on a stone throne supported by the earth rolling beneath it. To either side of the throne stood a tall, willowy woman in a white gown slit high on one thigh. The throne and its occupants were preceeded by a marching band, who split to either side to allow the rolling platform to meet up with the stage. Rockalanche stood from his throne and held up his arms while the crowd chanted his name, and then allowed the two women to remove his cape and belt. He stepped onto the stage and then stomped one foot to send the platform and throne rolling back to where it had come from.

“How nostalgic. I remember this fellow. I was there when he made his debut. The matches had all finished and the then-reigning champion had successfully defended his title against those competing that day. When the regular matches were over, they offered the chance for someone in the crowd to come forth and challenge the champion. Rockalanche did, and won the title of champion by only fighting a single match. I am quite curious to see how he will fare against the young lady.” Uncle Iroh mused.

“She’s just a little girl. I’m sure I could defeat her easily.” Zuko muttered resentfully.
Rockalanche got into position and suddenly rocks were falling from the ceiling; they were nearly to the girl’s head before anyone noticed what happened. He was already moving to secure her in place so she couldn’t dodge. The Blind Bandit just smirked, and his rockfall went shooting away from her, towards him, correcting en route to hit lower when she took his feet out from under him and made him do a split. The audience winced at the sound of a fist-sized rock beaning Rockalanche between the eyes. The Blind Bandit slid her foot forward and made a dismissive little flick with her fingers, and he went flying from the platform, just like all those who came before, already unconscious.

The crowd sat stunned for a moment at seeing the five-time champion defeated so easily by the tiny newcomer and then they began to cheer.

“Alright, tournament’s over, now I can find out where the Avatar is.”

“Uh, Prince Zuko, that might not be a good…ah blast it. Too impatient by far, that’s my nephew.”

“Is he going to challenge the new champion?” A man seated nearby wondered.

“It is not his plan, but I fear he will end up doing so nonetheless. Foolish boy…he’s not even an earthbender!”

“Not an earthbender? But then what does he think he can do up there?”

“At this point, all I can hope is that he is not humiliated too badly.”

“Yeah…that little girl is something else, isn’t she?”

“Indeed, I feel quite honored to have witnessed her debut. She is a true earthbending master.”

“Uh…what does Prince angry jerk think he’s doing?”

“I’m going to assume he’s planning to demand to know where Aang is…of course, by stepping up into the ring, he just became a contender. This should be interesting. Pay close attention, all of you, there’s going to be a pop quiz later while we dissect his fighting style so we know what to expect if we ever cross paths again and aren’t able to just slip away.”

“Impatient, huh, metal-man…you’ve been practically vibrating in your seat this whole time. Well, now’s your chance, let’s see what you’ve got!” The Blind Bandit chortled.

“What? I’m not up here to fight you, I was just waiting for the tournament to be over so I can find out where the Avatar is.” Zuko scoffed.

“News flash, impatient one…when the tournament is over the folks in the crowd have a chance to try their luck challenging the champion—which would be yours truly. Looks like it’s you. So, what’s your name anyway?”

“Zuko…I don’t have time for this!”

“Well, you’d best make time, Zuzu” The Bandit mocked.

“DON’T CALL ME THAT!” Zuko roared as twin jets of flame shot from his hands. The Bandit’s eyes widened for a second and then a wall shot up in front of her and caught the flames.

“You’re not even an earthbender…you’re a firebender! Oh, you’re definitely not getting away,
Sparky, I’ve never had a chance to test myself against a firebender before. Stand and fight…this should be interesting.”

Aang sagged in his seat and sulked. “I wanted to challenge her.”

“Unless you used earthbending you would have given yourself away, and last I checked you couldn’t make a pebble move. You’d have been decimated in short order.”

“I could have used waterbending”

“Which would have been as much a giveaway as airbending is, and you’ve only ever used it offensively versus water, you’ve never practiced using it versus earth.”

“You know, I was feeling pretty contemptuous of angry jerk out there—he was just stomping around and roaring and just shooting fire all over like a kid having a temper tantrum…but he’s adapting the longer the fight goes on.” Sokka mused.

“What do you mean?” Katara wondered.

“He’s realized she was sensing him through the ground and reacting to him through it, so he started spending more time in the air so she can’t ‘see’ him, and launching his attacks then. He’s also proven to be pretty nimble on his feet, even with all the clanky armor weighing him down—he only touches down long enough to launch himself up again, and he’s dodged a couple of attacks that foiled the other earthbenders.”

“Is he…stripping?” Katara asked warily.

“Just his armor—good thinking.” Harry chuckled.

Zuko launched himself into the air again and tossed one of his metal bracers to the far side of the platform away from him and then launched another gout of flame when it landed. The Bandit reacted to the bracer landing and had to split her concentration to also ward off the flame attack.

Their battle began to look like a strange dance, with the earth surging and rippling below and the flames shooting and dancing above.

“He’s lasted a lot longer than any of the earthbenders did.” Katara realized.

“Only because she’s not going all out. She said herself she’s never faced a firebender before; she’s just taking advantage of the opportunity to see what all he’s got. Plus, she seems to be having fun.” Harry replied absently, his attention mostly on the battle.

Zuko went flying from the platform after a full five minutes of fighting. He was unconscious when he landed. Some of the crowd, who had been muttering angrily since the Prince revealed himself as a firebender on the stage, stood and looked as though they were going to follow—after all, he was unconscious and the only person with him was a single, overweight old man. The uncle threw him over one shoulder and hustled them both out of there—he needn’t have worried as the entrance sealed itself behind them and allowed them both to escape without pursuit.

“She did that, didn’t she? Why though? They’re Fire Nation.” Katara wondered.
“And the old guy never did anything besides sit quietly in the audience, plus she probably wants to see what ponytail guy can do once he trains up and comes back to challenge her. You were right, Sokka, he was adapting—what’s more, you could almost see his lessons coalescing as the fight wore on. This is probably the first fight he’s ever been in against a completely unknown opponent, where he had to think on his feet and figure out what his opponent was going to do next. Sparring practice can only do so much, especially if you’re working solely with a particular style—if the folks you’re sparring with are using the same style, there’s only so many moves that each of you will make, which means it becomes fairly easy to predict what the other is likely to do. In fact…as soon as I think everyone is ready, maybe we should let ponytail guy catch up to us once in a while.”


Harry got distracted for a moment by the sight of the Blind Bandit disappearing into the platform while wearing the champion’s cape and holding the belt aloft. He cast a quick tracking charm on her so they could find her later and approach her about being Aang’s earthbending teacher, and then turned back to answer Katara’s question.

“Because it’s a necessary step to mastery—testing what you can do against someone you can’t predict. There’s four of us—five, if the Bandit agrees to help us—and he’s got himself and his uncle, though he really seems to consider chasing Aang his own personal task, so it might actually be just him. Barring that, I suppose we could also look for bandits, pirates, thugs and other assorted bad guys to fight—restore order, help the ordinary folks they’re preying on and get valuable fight experience all in one go. It’s an idea.”

“Oh no! She’s gone! How are we going to find her again?” Aang noticed.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it covered. I’m tracking her right now. She just finished a big tournament and won the championship, so it’s probably not the best time to approach her—I’m sure she wants to celebrate her victory. I should be able to find her tomorrow. For now, let’s just head back to camp and have dinner, and we can go find her in the morning.”

After dinner, while they sat around the fire, Harry dug out a flute—he had two, one was a simple, hand-carved flute made of wood that Hagrid had given him for Christmas first year. The other, which he left packed away, was a metal concert flute in a velvet-lined case. That one had been a personal indulgence. He had learned to play flute while in elementary school, though he’d always had to borrow an old one from the teacher, since the Dursleys had considered buying him a flute or letting him join the school band to be a needless indulgence and a waste of money for a freak like him. He had seen the thing in the window of a store while out wandering around one day and hadn’t been able to resist. He didn’t normally play in front of people, but being outside, under the stars, in front of a cozy campfire, seemed to call for a bit of music. This was supposed to be an adventure vacation—he supposed it wouldn’t hurt if he indulged himself just a bit.

“Ah, nephew, awake I see. How is your head?”

Zuko just clenched his jaw and gripped the railing of the ship with white-knuckled hands. He’d been quite surprised to wake up back on the ship—and mortified to realize his uncle, and then the crew, had to carry his unconscious body back to it after he’d been defeated and humiliated by that earthbender girl.

“You should remember to thank the young lady if ever we encounter her again. She blocked the cavern so I could leave with you in peace. I’m afraid many of the spectators in the audience were none too pleased to find a firebender in their midst. She even gave back your armor.”
Far from making him feel better, his uncle’s words seemed to make the boy more morose.

“We need to find that girl again”
“She’s a bit young for you, nephew”
“Stop being ridiculous! She’s going to be the avatar’s earthbending teacher, I’m sure of it. Once they hear word of her, she’d be the obvious choice. Since she was at that tournament and not with the avatar tells me they haven’t yet made contact with her. I intend to be there when they do.” Zuko turned to look at his uncle and found him staring into space, head cocked to one side.

“ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME?”

Iroh simply held up a hand for quiet. “Listen, nephew. Do you hear it?”

Zuko glared at him but obediently quieted down to listen as well. He didn’t hear anything but the sound of the water slapping against the hull, and the calls of the few seabirds in the area. Just when he was about to lose his temper again and demand his uncle explain himself, he heard, very faintly, the sound of music.

“Uncle…I’ve never heard music like that before. Have you?”

“Well…I can’t say. Perhaps. I have not heard all the music in the world, after all.”

“It’s different, uncle, and you realize it as much as I do. Could it be airbender music, do you think? It wouldn’t have been heard anywhere in a hundred years.”

“I couldn’t say, nephew. I am not a hundred years old, after all.”

“It’s them, uncle. We need to go get them right now!”

“Prince Zuko, think about what you are suggesting. The men traveled a long way, both by rhino and then by ship. We ourselves traveled a long way by rhino and then sat through a earthbending tournament—a tournament, I might add, you have only just regained consciousness from! What’s more, dinner is nearly ready and I’m hungry”

Zuko’s stomach rumbled, much to his annoyance.

“As are you, by the sound of it. If they are just lying around playing music, chances are they are not going anywhere at the moment. Remember, they are here to find the avatar an earthbending teacher, so they’ll likely not be leaving anytime in the next few hours.”

Zuko growled in impatience before stalking towards the bow of the ship.

“I’m going to find out where that music is coming from and then I’ll return. We can have dinner and then grab them in the wee hours of the morning…all of them. My mistake at the south pole was in not securing the avatar’s companions. He wouldn’t have escaped had they not come along to help him. I’ll return in a little while.”

Iroh sighed as Zuko flipped over the rail and landed with a thud on the dock below.

“We need to move our camp.”
“What? Now? We were about to go to bed!”

“Prince Zuko is in town. I shouldn’t have been playing my flute. He seems to have followed the sound of it to come looking for us. He’s back at his ship now, but he might be returning with soldiers. We should leave before they have a chance to get back here.”

“How do you know?”

“Hedwig. She’s been flying around keeping an eye on things.”

“Oh. Good job, Hedwig.”

“Did you find something?”

“Yes, general. We believe we found the prince’s tracks. He seems to have spent some time walking in a circle.”

Iroh made a fire in his palm to illuminate the ground better in the pre-dawn gloom. Zuko came over to see what they were looking at.

“I can’t have been walking in a circle…I was walking in straight lines, trying to cover as much ground as I could…the music never seemed to get any closer. I thought it was just echoing off the hills and confusing me.”

“It may be there is a spirit hereabouts that was playing tricks on you in order to help protect the avatar, nephew. I wouldn’t take it so hard.”

“If it was leading me in a circle, the avatar will be in the center. Men, spread out along my tracks and converge on the center!”

The soldiers spread out as ordered and started walking forward. They met in the center at an abandoned camp—the ashes of the campfire were still warm.

Zuko growled and his hands clenched in anger and frustration.

“Damn it! That spirit or whatever must have warned the avatar we were coming! I knew we should have grabbed them last night!”

“Nephew, calm yourself. You yourself were here last night and it did you no good. “

“We need to search the town and see if there were any reports of a flying bison or any of the avatar’s group.”

“You and I cannot do that, nephew. We will be rather conspicuous after our adventures yesterday.”

Zuko’s jaw clenched in frustration, but then he relaxed and nodded. “Fine, men…get yourselves some Earth Kingdom clothing to blend and go spread out through town. Listen for any rumors of the avatar, his group or his bison. Uncle, you and I are going to find the earthbender.”

“And how do you propose to do that, my nephew? The arena is closed—the next earth rumble isn’t for a few weeks yet.”

“She’s a little girl and she’s a master earthbender capable of wiping out a dozen earthbenders one
after another without even trying…which means she has the leisure to work on it and the best teachers money can buy. There’s a big estate on the north side of town. We’ll start there.”

“After breakfast.”

“Uncle!”

“Look around at the village, nephew! It’s only just now nearing dawn. Most of the good citizens of this place are not even out of bed yet! How are the men supposed to find any rumors, when there are so few people on the streets? Also, we would not have much success knocking at the doors of wealthy estates so early in the morning either. Most likely the families who live in them are still abed this early.”

“Fine, men, grab some clothes while it’s still dark and head back to the ship for breakfast. We’ll begin once the villagers have begun to stir. Move out!”

The soldiers sighed and crept off to go raid a few laundry lines. Prince Zuko stomped back towards the ship.

“So…we ready to go get Aang’s earthbending teacher already? You said you were tracking her?”

“Yeah…and she’s moving…in fact, she’s moving pretty fast. We should check it out. That’s about where her trail started off from.”

“I’ll bet anything prince angry-jerkface has something to do with this.”

“That’s a sucker’s bet…we all know he had something to do with it.”

The gang picked up the pace and eventually came to a walled estate. They could hear a commotion out in front. The skidded around to the front and saw servants running around putting out a couple of small fires and a bunch of milling people all talking at once.

A well-dressed man and woman stood at the center of the crowd.

“Has something happened? What’s going on?”

“What’s going on? I’ll tell you what’s going on! A couple of firebenders just kidnapped a young girl!”

“We kept her hidden away.” The well-dressed woman admitted. “She’s blind…tiny, helpless and blind. ‘And yet, somehow those firebenders learned of her existence and kidnapped right from beneath our very roof…right in front of us, no less!”

“Which way did they go?”

A column of smoke sprouted up in the city.

“I’m guessing that way. Come on!” Sokka pointed. He, Katara and Aang took off running. Harry facepalmed and took off after them.

“Finally! Someone is rescuing my daughter rather than just standing around talking!”

“Aren’t the guards already chasing them, sir?”
“Well yes, but the firebenders already got passed them once, didn’t they?”

“Oh, my poor tiny, helpless little girl! Kidnapped by rogues! Oh, whatever will become of her!”

“You there! Find me a couple of strong, dangerous men. They won’t get away with this!”
The Blind Bandit gets kidnapped...a lot.

Chapter Summary

Harry mounts a rescue mission, doles out sage wisdom, and then mounts another rescue mission.

“You fail at planning, Sparky.” The Blind Bandit scoffed with great disdain as she was thumped down onto the deck of a metal ship.

“Would you please be quiet?” Zuko growled back.

“You’re sweet-talking isn’t going to work on me, not after you tried to burn down my house and kidnapped me.”

“Wah, wah.”

“Wah wah? I think I just lost all remaining respect for you…not that I had such a terrible amount to begin with, but geez, you’re now in the negatives Sparky.”

“Would you stop calling me that stupid name!”

“Fine…Zuzu.”

“GRRRR…” He growled while flames shot out of both fists.

The girl flinched and looked slightly panicked for a moment. Zuko deflated and slumped in place, feeling like a heel.

They were on his ship, out on the water, which meant no earth for her to use. She was tiny and blind and a girl…and for the moment, completely helpless.

The girl slowly relaxed and turned her sightless eyes towards his general direction, once he let the flames he’d called die down.


“Would you like some tea, Miss Bei Fong?” Uncle hurriedly interjected.

“Call me Toph, and yes some tea sounds lovely.”

The streets were crowded with people all talking about the strange surprise attack by Fire Nation to kidnap a young girl, which made travelling through the streets difficult.

“I’m telling you, I was at the Earth Rumble last night…that little girl was the Blind Bandit, sure as I’m standing here, and that boy was the same firebender that challenged her for the title right there at the end!”

“So…what? It’s vengeance, because she beat him?”
“Maybe he’s fallen in love with her?”
“No, he discovered she comes from a wealthy family and is holding her for ransom!”
“I think you might be onto something...he was stripping at the tournament, but apparently she actually is blind, and couldn’t appreciate it.”
“My word! What is the world coming to? Young men stripping for girls in public!”
“Isn’t she kind of young?”
“Maybe she’s not as young as we all thought...she might just be short.”

Here and there small groups of teenage girls were gathered and whispering together while giggling. Consensus among them seemed to be that the Blind Bandit was rather lucky, what with having a dashing rogue—even if he was Fire Nation—fall so madly in love with her that he kidnapped her to carry her away into the night to live with him on his ship.

The girls seemed to have concluded Zuko was a defector from the Fire Nation army who could no longer stomach the war against Earth Kingdom, the very people who had birthed the woman he loved. There was much sighing and swooning—Harry had no doubt the story would end up becoming a popular ballad at some point, given how it seemed to have seized the imaginations of the local girls.

“I don’t believe these people! Have they all gone quite mad? He’s a crazy, evil, Fire Nation thug and he kidnapped that girl and tried to set her house on fire! He stole Aang’s earthbending teacher! We can’t let him get away with this!” Katara growled.

“And we won’t. I want you three to go back to camp and pack up.” Harry assured her.

He dug out the map he had stolen from Zuko’s ship and unrolled it on a convenient crate nearby and scanned the immediate vicinity of Gaoling.

“Ah, good, it’s not too far. We’ll meet up...here.” he tapped the map.

“Why there?” Aang wondered.

“It’s apparently an abandoned mining town. There should be plenty of earth to work with, and no one around to report on our movements. The ship is headed back towards the sea, which means with luck it should take them some time to figure out where we went and even longer to catch up to us. I’ll go rescue the Bandit and see if she’ll agree to help us. It shouldn’t be too hard. She’ll get to be the teacher of the avatar, have a bit of adventure and get away from her double life for a bit. Meanwhile, everyone who thinks they might get a chance at a reward will be chasing after the ship and Zuko trying to get her back, which should delay them even more.”

“What do you mean ‘get away from her double life’?” Katara asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? Her parents don’t know she’s the Blind Bandit. How did her mother describe her? Tiny, helpless and blind. She said they kept her ‘hidden away’. The people in town didn’t even know she existed! Now, I’ll grant you she’s tiny, and she’s blind...but helpless? The girl we saw last night tossing large, muscular men many times her age around like it was going out of style? Please!”

“We should all go to help rescue her. It’s too dangerous otherwise.” Katara insisted.

“I’m not going to engage them, I’m going to sneak. I can make myself invisible. I’ll be there and away before they even realize anything has happened. We’ll meet you at the mining village. Don’t
“Alright…but if you’re not back in three days we’re coming to rescue you!”

“Fair enough, but it won’t take nearly that long, you’ll see.”

It took Harry awhile to catch up with the ship. While they had been running across town (or trying to), listening to rumors and planning their next move, Prince Zuko’s ship had gotten a good way out to sea.

He wasn’t sure what he’d expected to see when he finally pulled up alongside the ship, but it certainly wasn’t seeing the Blind Bandit, in a delicate pale yellow dress and filmy shawl combination looking like a tiny, delicate china doll, and Prince Zuko, dressed in loose pants and a sleeveless button-up shirt, seated together at a low table that had been put up on the deck, sipping tea.

The boy’s uncle was seated a short distance away, along with a couple of the crew members, playing a board game and keeping a discreet eye on the two kids. It looked more like an awkward betrothal meeting than a kidnapping.

Zuko seemed much more relaxed than he usually did when they saw him. Normally, he was so tense he was practically vibrating from the tension in his muscles, and he was scowling, and stomping around with his hands clenched.

The Bandit must have cracked a joke or something—he couldn’t hear them clearly from where he was—because the Prince gave a small laugh and actually smiled. It was a strangely dorky, bashful smile, and it made him look years younger.

Harry was suddenly, viscerally struck by the fact that he was actually just a kid, not much older than he himself was, who’d been chasing after an impossible dream for years, on the feeble hope that someday he could go home.

It made him almost feel bad that he had to deny that hope to him once again…but, oh well. Life sucked sometimes, and there was no way he was allowing Aang to be taken back to the nation that massacred his people. so that they could continue their imperialist march against the rest of the world unopposed. It just wasn’t happening.

He drifted closer to the ship, flying slowly so he wouldn’t make much noise. It was lucky, really, that they had her out on the deck like this—it would make extracting her much easier. It was just too bad there were so many witnesses. He’d been hoping to switch her out with a clone disguised as her so they could be a good distance away before they realized they were gone. Well, maybe he’d still get a chance to do that.

Unseen by Harry, who was watching Zuko and the Bandit, Uncle Iroh blinked and rubbed his eyes and then cast a discreet look around at the others on deck.

He could see spirits ever since he had traveled to the spirit world in search of his son, Lu Ten, after his death at Ba Sing Se. Right now, he could see a dragon…no…not a dragon, at least, it was like no dragon he’d seen before. It had the same sinuous serpentine body, and it had wings, but they were feathered, like a bird, and it had a feathered crest that tufted out from its head and then ran the length of its body. It also had horns, more like the horns on a gazelle-deer than the horns most dragons had.
It wasn’t a single color either, like the dragons he’d seen before, which came in red or blue, its feathers contained all the colors of the rainbow, and its scales went from dark to light red, orange and yellow on its body, and then shades of green, indigo and violet as it got closer to its tail, and its wings contained the same colors. He knew he was the only one who could see it—he was certain there would have been a fearful clamor and cry among the crew had any of them spotted it, even though it didn’t seem to be doing anything besides hovering alongside their ship and watching the prince and their young guest. It was hard to judge expressions on that dragon-like face, but Iroh thought it looked sad...compassionate, maybe? It was hard to tell.

He had to clench his hands in his lap to keep them from shaking as he was seized with a sudden fearful worry that his nephew was going to die, or have some other cruel tragedy befall him. He wanted to curse the spirit and drive it off, but he dared not call its attention further on them than it already was—it was never wise to anger spirits; they could be capricious, and cruel if the mood took them. Even so, he was tempted—hadn’t his nephew suffered enough already?

He had already seen the boy change over the last few years from a sweet-natured, kind and gentle boy who only wanted what was best for their people, into a hardened, bitter, angry young man who was obsessed with finding and capturing the avatar, no matter what it took or what he had to do to accomplish his goal. His obsessions hadn’t yet turned him into a monster, but every day he feared where his path would eventually lead him. The boy walked such a fine line already—surely the spirits wouldn’t be so cruel as to lay further burdens on his young shoulders?

He turned his eyes to the children when Miss Toph suddenly spoke up.

“Hey, do you guys have a bathroom on this hunk of metal? All this tea…”

Zuko flushed and jumped to his feet. “Oh, yes…um…”

“I can see well enough to get around, if that’s what you’re worried about. It’s not as clear as if I was on the ground, but I can sense enough of the ship to not fall overboard. Just lead the way, Sparky.”

“Alright…if you’re sure.”

“I’m always sure.”

Iroh stood slowly as the spirit advanced and watched his nephew worriedly.

He was watching his nephew, the men he was playing cards with turned to look at him when he stood. The men in the crow’s nest were watching the skies for the approach of the avatar.

Toph halted when she felt fuzzy footsteps land beside her, and then felt someone appear to her other side. A boy’s voice whispered in her ear.

“This is going to feel very strange. I apologize in advance.”

Everyone turned to look at Toph when a muted ‘crack’ sounded next to her. She jumped, and looked around with sightless eyes, her face worried.

“What was that noise?”

“I don’t know. I can’t see anything!”
“Did anyone see what it was?”

“No.” Iroh answered. “I didn’t see anything.”

How could he tell anyone that a feathered dragon only he could see had vanished with young Toph just as the crack sounded, or that the Toph standing on the deck right now was not actually her but a spirit in disguise? He had seen it, and even he didn’t quite believe it. It would have sounded too crazy.

“How could he tell anyone that a feathered dragon only he could see had vanished with young Toph just as the crack sounded, or that the Toph standing on the deck right now was not actually her but a spirit in disguise? He had seen it, and even he didn’t quite believe it. It would have sounded too crazy.

“Huh. Someone’s touching the outside of the boat.” Toph suddenly announced, turning her sightless eyes towards the starboard side.

They all ran to look overboard, and Toph made her way to the portside and climbed up on the railing. Zuko turned back to look at her, and question her further about what she’d felt, only to see her balanced on the railing for a moment, before just letting herself fall forward in a graceful dive off the side.

“NO!” he screamed. While everyone was turning to see what had gotten him so upset, he was already in motion. He tore across the deck, leaped up on the railing and dove into the water after her.

“Zuko!”
“Prince Zuko!”
“Sir!”

Toph clutched at the strange arms wrapped around her and flexed her toes in the blessed, blessed earth, more relieved to be both be back on solid ground, and out of that…squeezy tube, or whatever it was she’d just gotten sucked into than she could possibly put into words.

The stranger let go of her, took two steps back and seated himself on the ground crosslegged in front of her.

“We’re…near my house.” Toph said in wonder.

“Yes. I had considered just taking you directly to our destination, but I figured it was really only right that you be given an actual choice in whether or not to become the avatar’s earthbending teacher. I should point out though that, as you’re already officially kidnapped, this is actually a perfect opportunity for you to have a bit of adventure and set aside your double life for a bit without repercussion. Everyone will be chasing Zuko’s ship looking for you, which should further delay him on his search for all of us.”

“So…Sparky was actually telling the truth. I had kind of wondered if he was just an escaped mental patient or something. So…you’re the avatar, huh? Where’ve you been the last hundred years?”

“I’m not the avatar, I’m just one of his teachers. I sent Aang, the actual avatar, and the others on to our next destination while I rescued you from Zuko’s ship. As for where he’s been, well, oddly enough he’s been frozen in an iceberg for the last hundred years. Sokka and Katara, who you’ll meet later if you come with us, found him and broke him loose. They’re from the Southern Water Tribe, and Aang is originally from the Southern Air Temple. We were actually living there for a few weeks until Zuko caught up to us again. He got another ship a lot quicker than we were hoping.”
“Yeah, he actually told me all that…well, not the part about the iceberg. He seems to think he was just hiding out with the Southern Tribe, while the rest of the airbenders were hiding out with the Northern tribe. I just wanted to see if your stories matched up.”

“Fair enough. So, have you decided whether or not to come with us?”

“Sure, why not? Just hang on for a sec while I get my stuff. I can’t exactly go adventuring dressed like this.”

“What’s your name, anyway. We can’t just keep calling you the ‘Blind Bandit’.”

“It’s Toph. Toph Bei Fong.”

“Well Toph, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Harry.”

“Nice to meet you too. I’ll meet you back here in a few.”

Just like that, a hole opened up beneath her feet and she vanished into the ground.

Harry made himself comfortable, leaning against the back wall of her estate, while he waited for her to return.

Iroh made his way slowly into the hold where most of the men were gathered in the galley and took a seat with a sigh.

“How is he, sir?”

“He’s resting. Thank you, everyone, for your quick action in going after him.”

“It was pretty close, even so. He didn’t want to come back up. We never did see the girl down there. Poor little thing…”

Iroh looked around at the men’s dejected faces and debated briefly with himself. He finally decided to lay their worries to rest. Zuko was down for the night, and if he asked the men to keep what he revealed to themselves, they would, even if they didn’t like it.

“There was a spirit lurking off the starboard bow earlier; a colorful, feathered dragon-spirit. I will admit, it is not a spirit I am familiar with, but I saw it nonetheless. It was just hovering there, watching Prince Zuko and the young lady. It was seeing this that prompted me to stand. I do not believe the young lady we saw dive off the side of the ship was actually the young lady herself. I think it was a spirit pretending to be her to throw us off the theft of the girl by the dragon. Unfortunately for the dragon, I could see him there, and I saw him grab the girl and vanish an instant before there was another girl in her place. It was trickery, and nothing more. I do not know if the avatar implored the spirit to aid him, or if the spirit took it upon itself so the avatar would not risk capture, but either way the result is the same.”

“We should tell the prince; he’s devastated that he wasn’t able to save the girl.”

“I know…and part of me would like to, a very large part, if I am honest with myself….however, I can only wonder if the spirit was trying to teach my nephew a lesson of some sort. He could have simply taken the girl and gone. He took her into the spirit world, where we could not follow, so there was no real need to hide her abduction. Instead, he left a duplicate and had her pretend to drown. Now, my nephew lies devastated by the senseless death of the young girl he so impulsively
kidnapped. I can only wonder if the whole ruse is an admonishment to him to think about the possible consequences of his actions—something I have tried to get him to consider again and again without success. While part of me hesitates to allow him to bear this burden, part of me wonders if I should not just let the ruse stand. Perhaps the pain he now feels will make the lesson stick. I will admit, I am uncertain as to the best course. My nephew can be unpredictable. I would not wish for this trickery to ignite in him a burning hatred for the avatar that will lead him to more foolish and ill-considered actions in the future.”

“Well, sir…I can say honestly that, so far as I know, it was indeed the young lady that jumped ship. I didn’t see any kind of dragon, and I didn’t see two girls at any point.”

“Indeed, it seems a strange and fanciful story, does it not? I do hope my eyes were not playing tricks on me…I grew rather fond of the young lady in the short time I knew her. I believe my nephew did as well. I have not seen him so at ease since he was a child, before his banishment.”

“He did seem different. It was rather startling, actually. You forget sometimes how young he actually is.”

“What you saw today is my nephew as he actually is, underneath all the anger and the bitterness and the bluster. Like I said, I have not seen him so since his banishment. It did my heart good to see it.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, sir…why was the prince banished? We never actually knew, just that he was…”

Iroh sighed as the men all leaned in, trying not to look too curious or too eager.

“That is a sad tale, and I feel I bear some responsibility for all that happened, though I did warn him not to speak. My brother…can be a hard man.”

“What happened, sir?”

“There was a war meeting. Prince Zuko was trying to get in to it, though the guards forbade him to pass. He said to me ‘If I’m supposed to rule someday, should I not be learning the things I need to know to do a good job?’ I agreed that he should be given that chance, and so I took him into the meeting with me, though I warned him not to speak out of turn.”

He sighed heavily, his gaze abstracted as he remembered that day, three years prior.

“One of the generals was laying forth his plan for the assembled generals and the Fire Lord. He wanted to send a platoon of new recruits to face a battle that would mean certain death for all of them, as a distraction to get more seasoned troops in place to launch a surprise attack from the rear. The prince was horrified that the general would so carelessly toss aside the lives of Fire Nation soldiers, and admonished the general that we should not so wastefully spend our people’s lives. The Fire Lord was very angry at the prince’s disrespect, and said there was only one way to settle the matter.”

“Agni Kai…a fire duel.”

“Indeed. It was set for the very next day, so that witnesses from the court could be gathered to watch.”

Iroh swallowed, his voice thick as he remembered what followed.

“When the prince turned to face his opponent, he found not the old general, as he’d been expecting,
but the Fire Lord himself. Since he had spoken out of turn in the Fire Lord’s own war chamber, it was the Fire Lord himself that Zuko had disrespected. The prince would have to duel his own father. When he saw who it was, he immediately threw himself to his knees and begged forgiveness, and refused to fight him. The Fire Lord called him a coward and told him he needed to learn respect… and that suffering would be his teacher. He struck him in the face and left the scar that still adorns it. Prince Zuko never raised a hand to defend himself.”

“His father did that to him? I always assumed it was some kind of training accident!”

The other men nodded, appalled, as they had thought much the same thing.

“It was no accident.” Iroh growled. “I looked away.” He continued in a softer voice. “I could not bear to watch. I can still hear him screaming….”

Iroh let out a shuddering breath and finished his tale.

“He was given basic medical care and told he was banished from Fire Nation until he could find and capture the Avatar, and that he was to be considered a failure and without honor until he did so. I informed the Fire Lord that I would be retiring and going with him. He was only thirteen, and he’d never really been out of the palace before but for a few family trips to the beach when he was small.”

“That’s why he’s so obsessed with finding the avatar.”

“Yes. His honor, his place, and his father’s love are all dependent upon his capture of the avatar. For all those long three years that we searched, he stayed focused and determined…but one can only exist so long on sheer determination. I feared he was very close to breaking. And then, one day, the avatar appeared, just a few short miles from our location. The avatar’s reappearance gave prince Zuko something he’d been lacking for a long, long time…hope. The avatar gives him hope that someday, all his wanderings and his suffering will come to an end.”

“And now all this happened. Poor kid. Maybe we shouldn’t say anything… it will probably not be very comforting to know that the spirits seem to have come forth en masse to set themselves against him, after everything else. His own father. Agni.”

The rest of the men said nothing, but Iroh could see they agreed, and were horrified that any father, no matter how stern, could inflict such a lasting wound on their son. He didn’t understand it himself. He regretted, in some ways, how long he was lost and broken by his grief over the death of his own son, Lu Ten—but the fact was, he was lost and he was broken by it.
It had taken the time he had spent to come to terms with it.
He still wondered though, if anything might have been different if he had gotten home sooner.
When he finally had returned, it was to find his father dead, his brother crowned as Fire Lord due to him being believed dead while he wandered the spirit world, his sister in law—dead or vanished into the night, he still wasn’t certain—his nephew lost and wandering the halls like a ghost, and his niece… a small child with cold eyes who smiled in delight at the suffering of those around her, fiercely devoted to her father… She had stood by her brother’s bedside while he thrashed in pain from the wound their father had inflicted on him, and watched without care as he cried and suffered, and taunted him with mocking words over his banishment.
And now, three years later, he had to stand by and watch helplessly as his kind, gentle nephew slowly turned into a cold and hardened man. Watching him today with young Toph had given him hope that all was not lost; his nephew, underneath it all, was still the same kind and gentle young man…and then everything had gone so wrong.

“Agni…watch over your child, I implore you. I do not know how much more he can take without breaking.”
He settled back to wait for his nephew to wake. Their future course, and the path his nephew walked, would all depend on how he chose to react to little Toph’s apparent drowning.

Far away, hidden behind the Bei Fong estate, Harry sighed and tried to forget the look of absolute anguish on Prince Zuko’s face as he pushed himself deeper and deeper into the ocean, reaching for his Toph-disguised clone. He’d been close to blacking out, he could see that much. He hoped his men had rescued him in time.

He shook off his musings as Toph resurfaced from beneath the earth, dressed in her earth-rumble gear and carrying a bag slung over one shoulder.

“Ready? I’m going to pop us again, to a spot far east of here, and then we’ll fly the rest of the way. I’ve never been to Tu Zin, which is our eventual destination, so I can’t take us directly there. I have a feeling our flight will be rather disconcerting to you, and I apologize, but the others are travelling by flying bison, and it will take too long to catch up to them on foot. Happily, Tu Zin doesn’t seem to be too terribly far, according to the map I looked at, so we shouldn’t be in the air for too long.”

“Can’t be helped, I guess.” Toph agreed gruffly, though she didn’t sound too pleased. “Alright, lead the way, Padfoot.”

Harry twitched and cast a startled glance Toph’s way. “Padfoot?”

“You walk like you’ve got pillows strapped to your feet… I can feel you moving around, but it’s muffled. That’s the best way I can describe it. You freaked out from me calling you that. Why?”

“Padfoot is my godfather’s nickname.”

“Does he have muffled footsteps too?”

“No…sometimes he’s a dog.” Harry explained, before apparating them both to the east.

“Sifu Harry! You’re back! And you brought the Blind Bandit!”

Harry braced himself for impact as the happily chortling Aang collapsed his glider in mid-glide and landed on his lap, all smiles.

“This is new…what happened to your broom?”

“It would have been too hard to fly both of us on it. Now, mind your manners. Avatar Aang, this is Toph Bei Fong, master earthbender and current Earth Rumble champion. Toph, this is Aang, current avatar, master airbender, journeyman waterbender, and soon to be apprentice earthbender.”

“Hi! Nice to meet you! Thanks for agreeing to be my teacher!”

“Nice to meet you too.”

“Where are the others?”

“They’re probably back at the house we picked to stay in. Sokka made us search all of them before he found one he liked and then he set up traps! He said we needed to secure the perimeter.”
“Good boy. I’m glad to see he’s been taking his lessons to heart.”

“I think Katara said something about lunch…”

Harry and Toph’s stomachs both gurgled.

“Glad to hear it.”

“Appa and Momo are off looking for food for themselves. Hedwig is on her way back to Chief Hakoda.”

“Oh?”

“Sokka and Katara both wanted to update him on where they were and what they’ve been doing, and they want to know what he’s been doing as well. They asked Hedwig if she’d carry the message for them and she agreed…that’s okay, isn’t it?”

“It’s fine. I think she gets bored sometimes, and she likes feeling useful. She knows we’re planning to be in one spot for a few days at least, and she can find us if we leave.”

“Who’s Hedwig?”

“She’s my owl. She’s been carrying messages for us back and forth to the water tribe/earth army alliance.”

“Cool. Who are Appa and Momo?”

“Appa is my flying bison and Momo is my flying lemur.”

“Wow, you guys have quite a menagerie going, don’t you?”

“They prefer to think of themselves, me and Aang as the ‘wind clan’. I guess they thought we should all have a cool name too.” Harry joked.

The carpet slowed to a halt in front of one of a long line of wooden buildings that lined either side of the street they were on.

The abandoned mining town of Tu Zin was rather reminiscent of a town in an old American western, and it held a feeling of abandonment and decay that could be felt as a physical presence almost. Everything was dead and still, but for the faint sounds made by Appa and Momo in the distance, and Sokka and Katara as they moved around inside their chosen base. Harry brought the carpet down with a gentle thump on the ground.

“Last stop, Tu Zin. Thank you for traveling with wizard airlines. Please enjoy your stay.”

“Prince Zuko…where do you think you are going?”

Zuko froze for a moment at the angry tone of his uncle’s voice but then continued as though unaffected.

“I’m going in search of the avatar.”
He had to stifle a yelp as his uncle dragged him away from the small river trawler he was about to climb into by the scruff of his neck and spun him to face him head on.

“You, my nephew, are an idiot.”

“Uncle…”

“NO! I grow tired of seeing you rush headlong into things without thinking them through. Again and again and again I tell you and you do not listen! Have you already forgotten that your impetuous actions in Gaoling led to the city rising up against us? Have you forgotten that there are likely a whole cadre of reward-seeking earth benders seeking to capture us? That little girl you kidnapped is gone now and still you don’t stop to think things through! Look at you, about to head back into the mess you made, alone in the middle of the night, without a word to anyone! Had I not heard you coming down here, you might well already have been captured or killed before I even realized you were gone!”

“It was all a trick, uncle! The avatar never showed up, and he would have…unless he knew that somehow the girl was safe and far away from here! I don’t know what they did or how, but they spirited her away right under our very noses…and I’m going to make him pay for that!”

“I too realized the girl is probably not dead. I think it was a spirit. There are ways for one to learn to detect interference by spirits. I think you need to study those techniques so that you no longer fall prey to their trickery. What you do not need to do is run off in the middle of the night, alone, like an idiot!”

Zuko flinched as Iroh took a deliberate step backwards and pointed to the doorway imperiously. “Return to your room, and we will speak further on this in the morning.”

Zuko bristled for a moment, but wasn’t able to sustain it under uncle’s unforgiving glare. He slumped, and shuffled off back to bed.

Once he was gone, Iroh slumped as well and let out a shaky breath.

“Nephew…what am I going to do with you?”

The boy was impulsive and reckless and temperamental…and so very wounded. He had tried, the spirits knew he had tried, but nothing he said or did seemed to get through to him. Maybe it was time to accept that perhaps he needed help.

With new determination speeding his steps, he made his way to the bridge where the night helmsman was on duty.

Sokka, Katara and Harry watched Aang fly across the field he and Toph had taken over as their earthbending training area and crash into Appa.


Aang staggered to his feet and glowered at the boulder and at Toph with equal disgruntlement.

“Come on, Twinkletoes, you have to be firm if you want to be an earthbender. You can’t be afraid of the rock, you have to face it head on. Like this…”

Toph leapt into the air and smashed into the boulder with her face, only to send it showering into a dozen pieces. She landed without apparent harm and dusted her hands off with a smirk.
“Until you can face the boulder and tell it to move, you’re not an earthbender.”

Harry could tell she was getting frustrated. She told Aang what he needed to do, but he just wasn’t getting it. Much as Bumi had feared, finding the ‘unwavering will of earth’ inside himself was proving to be problematical for the young airbender.

He glanced up and checked the position of the sun and figured enough time had passed that they could reasonably call a break without it seeming like he was trying to get Aang out of practice early.

“How about some lunch and then we’ll try again?”

Toph huffed a bit, but she really was frustrated, and so she agreed without too much fuss.

Katara had left the stew they’d had the night before warming near the fire, so lunch was quickly dished out for everyone.

“Aang, did you try meditating on the nature of earth before you began training?”

“A little. It’s hard…except when it’s squishy. That was about as far as I got.” Aang admitted sheepishly.

“It’s hard, except when it’s squishy…great insight there, Twinkletoes. That’s the wisdom of the ages, right there. I’m sure that will defeat the Fire Lord. “Fear my rocks, which are hard, except when they are squishy. Yea, I’m sure that’ll put the fear of your wrath into him.” Toph scoffed.

They all started laughing, even Katara, who bit her lip and covered her mouth to keep it from showing, while Aang stared all of them with wounded eyes and a trembling lip.

“Stop that, it was funny.” Harry chided.

“Now, since you didn’t really meditate on the nature of earth beforehand, maybe that’s what you should do after lunch. Go sit in the field you two chose, wear a blindfold and just try to feel the earth beneath you.”

“If you think it will help.”

“I do. See if you can feel where it changes from soil to bedrock…see if you can feel the hardness of granite or the brittleness of shale. Rock is dense and hard and solid and unyielding…but it also has breaking points. See if you can find them. Different rocks have different compositions and they shatter differently, see if you can feel those differences. Try to find the personalities and flavors of the different types. Geologic processes are slow. Continents shift, mountains form, and it takes a long, long time for it to happen. That’s probably something you’re going to have to take into account as well—earth is the foundation; it doesn’t want to move or change, except in its own time.”

Aang nodded, but he didn’t seem too hopeful.

“It might help to think about your temple too” Harry realized. “Up there, the wind was omnipresent; it blew around and through the whole complex, but the temple, and the mountain stood firm and….unchanging” Harry’s voice trailed off. “Oh.”

He turned to look at Aang and met his eyes. Aang stared back for a moment, confused, and then his eyes widened in sudden understanding. “Oh.” Aang repeated.
Harry sighed and opened his arms, which Aang fell into as though clinging to a lifeline.

“If you master this…you can make sure they stay that way.”

“I guess I didn’t really think of it like that.”

“Okay, is anyone else confused?” Toph demanded.

“Nah, makes perfect sense to me.” Sokka shrugged.

“Oh, Aang” Katara said softly at the same time, before moving in to join the hug.

“It would be nice if someone explained it to me.”

“Just a little mental block. Once he does some preliminary work with trying to sense the earth, I’m sure things will start going a little better.”

“It was good advice.” Toph admitted, willing to let the subject drop for the moment. “It’s pretty much the same thing I’ve been telling him all along—you have to feel the earth, listen to it…then you have to dig in your heels and make it move.”

“Each of the elements has something to teach. Air teaches you to maneuver around a problem and to come at it from unexpected angles. Water is all about adaptability—put it in a cup, it becomes the cup; put it in a river it becomes the river. Earth teaches that sometimes you just have to stand your ground and refuse to budge.”

“Looks like fire is the odd one out. No surprise there.” Sokka grumped disdainfully.

“Hardly…fire is growth and change.” Harry disagreed.

“Growth and change? Destruction and badness more like!”

“Fire spreads unchecked when not controlled; even the tiniest flame can become an inferno given half a chance. Fire consumes that which it burns and changes it.”

“Kills it. Makes soot and ash and charcoal.”

“Smelts metal, melts butter, the heat of the sun warms the earth and makes plants grow, and even in destruction it can sometimes bring about renewal. It is a harsh element when it rages uncontrolled, but it is also the light of a candle to illuminate the darkness, the campfire that friends gather around in the night, the hearth fire that beckons you home to warmth, family, and food.”

Sokka sighed and crossed his arms, but he didn’t argue the point.

“Nature is a harsh mistress sometimes, because it is vast and the powers contained within it are all operating on such a large scale that it can be devastating to the little folks caught in the path. Air can be the breath of life, the cooling summer breeze…”

Aang sat back on his heels and smiled.

“It can also be the storm wind, and the tornado.” Aang’s smile slipped a little, but he didn’t argue the point either.

Harry turned to Katara next and her eyes widened.

“Water is the source of all life, our bodies are something like 70% water. Water is the trickling
stream, the nourishing rain, the bountiful ocean…”

“It’s also the tsunami and the hurricane.” Katara whispered.

He turned next to Toph.

“Earth is the foundation and the bedrock upon which we live, grow food, spend our lives…it’s also the earthquake and the mudslide and the rockslide”

“Slow movement and sudden upheavals.” Toph agreed cheerfully. “And very, very stubborn.”

“Exactly. Each element has both its gentle, nurturing side and its dangerous, deadly side.”

Aang frowned again and looked pensive, but he was listening.

“When the four elements are in balance in nature there is growth and life. When the four elements are in balance in a human body, it’s the same. Your bones have to be strong enough to support your frame and give you the stability to move, your teeth strong enough to eat with. You have to have a certain amount of water every day or you grow dehydrated and that can lead to sickness and even death. You need air to breathe—no air, no life. Your body has to stay within a certain temperature range – too low, you die, too high you die. From a more emotional standpoint, air is freedom, earth tradition and order, water family and community, and fire is passion. Too much freedom would be chaos, too much order stifles growth, as does too much clannishness.”

“What do you mean by that? Surely the bonds between family are always a good thing.” Katara objected.

“You have to find a balance between bonds of the ingroup—your family, tribe or nation, and bonds with the outgroup—other families, tribes and nations, or you just end up with a lot of small groups glaring at each other suspiciously. Fire, or passion, grown unchecked is easy—war, jealousy, obsession, anger— all dark passions that tear apart communities and families. Removed altogether, there would be no passion, love or creativity. All the elements are equally valuable, equally necessary, but they have to be in balance or things begin to go wrong.”

“And I’m supposed to bring balance back to the world. How am I even supposed to do that?”

“One step at a time. First, you train. You need to find the heart of the four elements and find the balance between them in yourself. Second step, you face and defeat the Fire Lord. He is the leader of the Fire Nation, and it is his will that drives the people of Fire Nation to burn across the world unchecked. The third part will be both the easiest and the hardest.”

“What’s the third part?”

“Rebuilding something new. Creation is always harder than destruction. It takes nine months to bring forth a single human being…it can take only moments to kill them. A forest fire rages through an area and destroys everything in its path in hours or days; it can take months for new growth to start to fill in the devastated areas, and years for the forest to grow back to what it was. What will make it easier is that you’ll have lots of help for that part—all the people of the world will have to do their own small part to rebuild their own little corners of the world. Your job will be to help the leaders of the different groups establish the laws, treaties and agreements that will hopefully lead to a lasting peace once the war is over. That’s going to take time, patience and delicacy—the end result will reflect the care put into it.”

“It sounds like a lot.”
“You know what they say—every journey begins with a single step. That’s what you’re doing now. Patience, Aang. That’s a lesson you should take from the earth—things move at their own speed, and sometimes the best thing to do is wait and listen for the proper moment. When the moment comes, then is the time for quick action. That’s balance too—move too slowly, the moment is lost; move too quickly, and you might actually hinder your goals.”

“Patience, stability, and the heart of the earth.” Aang repeated thoughtfully. He finished the last of his lunch and stood.

“Thank you for the lesson, Sifu Harry.” He said with a bow, which Harry stood to return.

Aang then turned to Toph, who cocked her head and gazed in his general direction.

“Sifu Toph, I’m ready to begin again.”

Toph stood as well and returned his bow, then straightened and began to march off back to the training field.

“Well, come on! Time is wasting, Twinkletoes.”

“Prince Zuko, I do wish you would reconsider. I really think we should head off and see if that guru is still there like he was before. I really think getting a bit of training in spiritual matters will be of help on your search.”

“Uncle, we don’t have time to take a vacation! We need to stay on the trail. There’s an abandoned mining town not far from Gaoling. I think they went there—it would be a perfect place: plenty of earth, no one around, and no real chance of our soldiers stumbling across them—the war front hasn’t gotten that far, and there’s nothing there anyone wants. There have been no sightings of them south of Gaoling, nor any along the coast heading north. Unless they’ve headed towards Ba Sing Se, it seems the most likely place for them to be.”

“I will agree with you on one condition nephew. If you fail to capture the avatar there, I want you to agree to seek the guru for spiritual training.”

“It’s a waste of time!”

“It is not. We know he has spirit allies. This could be an important and necessary step. We all can do it! It could be fun, who knows.”

“You want all of us to join you for spiritual training?” Lieutenant Jee, the ship’s captain muttered.

“Sure, why not? We’re all in this together, and the spirits tricked all of us.”

“I always wanted to be enlightened.” Tcho, the ship’s cook admitted quietly. “It always seemed like something I’d like to do someday.”

“Well then, it is all settled…right, Prince Zuko?”

“Fine. If we fail to capture the avatar we’ll go see your guru or whatever and waste our time.”

“Positive attitude, nephew.” Iroh chided. “You need to lighten up and relax once in a while.”

Zuko gave him a dirty look as he pushed himself off the wall he’d been leaning on.
“Yeah, right. The last time I did that a girl committed suicide in front of me.” He snorted. The crew was quiet as he went stomping off.

“Huh…maybe it’s a good thing he never came to music night.” Nataku, the engine room operator muttered.

Iroh looked like he wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry, so it was left to Jee to smack the man in the back of the head.

“Hey! Hedwig’s back! Great, I can’t wait to hear how dad and the others have been doing.” Sokka cheered.

He removed the message from Hedwig’s leg, and she fluttered off to land near Harry. Harry offered her some owl treats from his pocket.

He glanced up and did a double take when he spotted Sokka and Katara both reading the note with wide eyes and horrified faces.

“Hey, you two, what’s the deal? Is something wrong?” Toph demanded. “I could swear both your hearts just stopped!”

“Guys?” Aang asked worriedly.

“The Fire Nation is heading to the South Pole” Katara whispered. “Gran-gran…everyone…” Sokka jumped to his feet and began marching to where their things were.

“We need to go now and help.”

“Both of you, stop.” Harry commanded. “Let me see the letter.” Katara handed it over and Harry read through it quickly.

“Damn it…this is obviously a trap to draw the men of your tribe out. If they head down there they’re going to be slaughtered.”

“If they don’t our village will be annihilated!”

“Not if I get there first.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I can travel long distances very quickly, much more quickly than if we took Appa. What’s more, I can get down to the South Pole and gather up the villagers and get them away probably before the fleet gets anywhere near there. I can take them to your father and the others and they can take them somewhere safe to wait out the remainder of the war.”

“And what are we supposed to do in the meantime?”

“Exactly what you’re doing now—training. Plus, don’t forget Zuko. I’m sure by now he’s realized I tricked him. That means he’ll be looking for us. He seems to have a knack for finding us. If he does, it falls to you to make sure Aang gets away.”
“But our village!”

“Should be fine if I can get there quickly enough.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s actually less dangerous for one person to sneak in and spirit everyone away than it would be for the fleet and all of us on Appa to fly there the long way and try to engage them. Hedwig!”

Hedwig flew down and landed on his arm.

“Where’s Chief Hakoda?” he asked, while reaching gently with his mind. He fixed the image of the man and his surroundings in his mind and then let Hedwig go. “Thanks, girl.”

“I’ll be back as quickly as I can. If anything happens and you do have to leave, don’t worry. I’ll be able to find you again.” So saying, Harry closed his eyes and focused, twisted in place and disappeared.

Silence, then the sound of many men drawing weapons and crying out in surprise— that’s what greeted Harry when he suddenly appeared in the midst of the Southern Water Tribe’s encampment. He’d gotten there just in time, by the look of things. They were in the process of loading up their ships and getting ready to leave.

He took a slow look around, and part of him had to stifle a grin at the looks of disbelief and consternation on the faces surrounding him.

“Chief Hakoda, I presume?”

“Who are you and how did you get here?”

“I’m Harry. Until recently I’ve been travelling with your son and daughter. They just received your message. I had a bit of a battle convincing them to stay put. Hopefully you and your men will be easier to convince.”

“You want us to stay here? Leave our people to be slaughtered!”

Harry glared at the man reproachfully and the tension slowly leached out of his body.

“Am I to assume you had some purpose for coming here, spirit? If so then say your piece. Our people need us.”

“Yes, they do, and Sokka and Katara need you as well…but you would be better served in planning what to do with your people once I bring them here to you than running off to face possible extinction.”

The tribesmen bristled and grumbled amongst themselves at the seeming slight on their bravery and battle prowess and Harry stifled a sigh.

“We ran into commander Zhao when we fled the Southern Air Temple. He has dozens of ships all over the waters down there—big battleships with catapults and lots of soldiers. He’s looking for vengeance—all of us not only escaped his net and crippled two of his ships, but all of you struck a lot of blows against Fire Nation with the information we sent you while he was distracted searching for the avatar. He’s been made to look foolish and he wants more than anything to destroy your tribe root and branch to soothe his battered ego. He’s going to bring everything he has to bear on you. I’ve no doubt you would fight valiantly and to the last man…but sometimes it’s better to seek a different
“Speak plainly. What is it you propose to do?”

“I’ll extract your people from the South Pole and bring them here to you. It will be up to you to find someplace safe to put them. I can get down there very quickly. This is obviously a trap, so Zhao will be taking his time to give all of you a chance to get down there before he starts his attack. I can have everyone safely extracted before then. Unfortunately, I can only pull one other person with me when I travel like I did to arrive here so quickly, so I’ll have to bring them by a longer route. It will take me some time to return here. I have the means to transport everyone at once, and move unseen, but it will take time. I want your word that you and your men will stay put and give me time to return here.”

Hakoda stood frozen with indecision, so he looked to the others gathered nearby, listening in. The men murmured among themselves, trying to decide. One the one hand, none of them liked the idea of trusting a stranger with the lives of their wives and children; on the other hand, they knew he’d been travelling with the avatar and had strange spirit powers. One by one the men quieted down and nodded to Hakoda who nodded back, his face taut with worry and resignation.

“Very well, spirit. We will entrust the safety of our people to your hands.” He sighed.

Harry bowed slightly to acknowledge his words. “Where are we, exactly?”

“You’re here, how could you not know?”

“I came to you, not to your location. It would be helpful to know where I need to travel to upon my return.”

Bemusedly, Hakoda brought out a map and showed Harry the spot on the map where they were currently located. They were fairly far north; even flying it was going to take some time to return. He made some quick calculations of the distances involved and nodded.

“I should return with your people within three days; hopefully it won’t take quite that long and I’ll return sooner. I should get going now.”

Harry twisted in place and disappeared.

Hakoda blinked and hesitantly waved an arm through the empty space where Harry had just been standing.

“Are we certain we didn’t just suffer a mass-hallucination due to stress?” Bato wondered.

Wordlessly Hakoda pointed towards the ground. There was a set of footprints in the sand.

Kanna just blinked at Harry when he appeared in the midst of their village and looked him up and down while he dug out his winter cloak and shivered in the cold arctic wind.

“I really should have done that before I left. Damn, it’s cold down here.”

“Greetings, spirit. What brings you back to our village? More importantly, where are my
grandchildren?"

"Sokka and Katara are currently in Tu Zin, an abandoned mining town in the southeastern Earth Kingdom. We found the avatar an earthbending master a few days ago and we set up camp there so he could begin mastering earth. You would be very proud of both of them. Katara is already well on her way to being a waterbending master, and Sokka has come a long way with his warrior training."

"That is good to know" Kanna admitted, "but it still doesn’t explain why you’re here."

"I’m here to evacuate your village and take you to the men of your tribe. I don’t know where you’ll be going after that—they’re supposed to be thinking of what to do with all of you while we’re on our way up there."

"Evacuate? This is our home."

"I know that, however igloos can be replaced…people can’t."

"Why would Fire Nation return? There’s nothing here but us." She demanded, while sweeping out her arm to indicate the double handful of frightened women and an equal number of small children.

"The men of your tribe scored a number of victories recently against the Fire Nation…” Harry explained briefly what he knew of events, from his and the gang’s travels, to the activities of the water tribe/earth nation alliance in recent weeks.

"This is vengeance, as well as a chance for him to make up for the losses they’ve recently suffered. If all goes well, the war will be over soon; when that happens, you can all return, rebuild, and continue your lives…but until then, it’s simply too dangerous."

Kanna sighed and looked out over the frozen tundra, sparkling glaciers and the deep blue ocean and her lined face grew despondent at the thought of leaving her home. She indulged herself for but a moment, and then her usual practicality took over.

"How do you propose to evacuate all of us, spirit?"

Harry withdrew his carpet and his tent. Kanna watched, stone faced, while he unrolled the carpet on the snowy ground.

"I know there aren’t many of us left, but we’ll not all fit on there."

Harry didn’t answer, he simply unrolled the tent onto the carpet after securing the base with a sticking charm, then tapped it to set it up.

"Even less will we all fit in there." Kanna pointed out, the scorn in her voice thick enough to choke on.

Harry just smiled and parted the doorway, inviting her to peek inside. He hadn’t bothered purchasing a real fancy tent, as he realized he’d have little use for a full-sized house all to himself while traveling. The interior of his tent was pretty simple, by wizard standards, though pretty special by water tribe standards to judge by Kanna’s gobsmacked face. It was a large wooden room, with a fireplace, and a small kitchen area towards the back. Two doors opened off of the room, one a simple bedroom, the other a bathroom.

He hadn’t bothered with a lot of furnishings; there was a low square table in the middle of the room, surrounded by four large pillows on the ground, and there was a futon in the bedroom, that was all. The kitchen was a simple stove and sink, surrounded by a lot of cabinets that took up most of the back wall.
“Why is there Fire Nation banner on the wall?”

“I stole it from the crown prince’s ship; it was in his room, well, that and a writing set. It’s the only stuff I kept—we sold everything else we could get our hands on, and blew up the ship. I have an air nomad banner too, see?” He pointed to a yellow and orange banner that was also on the wall.

“You robbed one of the temples?”

“I asked the avatar if I could have it.” Harry corrected reproachfully, before seating himself on the front half of the carpet and making it rise up a bit from the ground so it wouldn’t freeze.

Kanna eyed the interior space a final time, mentally calculating whether they all would fit, and then nodded to herself. “It will be a bit of a squeeze, with all our belongings.”

“There’s a second room with a bed in it. You can put your stuff in there so it won’t be too crowded in there, and I can arrange for more pillows for the floor before everyone gets in there so the ride will be at least somewhat comfortable. I won’t lie to you, it will be a long trip, with everyone piled on top of one another, but it’s really the best I can do on short notice.”

Kanna sighed and let the tent flap drop before straightening.

“I’ve been rather churlish, haven’t I? I don’t mean to sound ungrateful”

“But you’ve just found out that you need to desert your home for the foreseeable future. I understand.”

“Well, there’s nothing for it, I guess. We will try to be swift, spirit.”

Kanna called all the women and children to her and sent them to start packing up, before retreating to her own igloo to do the same. Harry did some quick transfigurations to make more pillows and then made the carpet on the floor of the tent a bit thicker so it would be more comfortable to sit on for a long period.

It didn’t take long for the women to pack up all they owned and stow it away in the tent. The southern water tribe lived simply, and there wasn’t much in the way of useless fripperies in their homes. Once everyone was inside, he explained the bathroom and the stove to them, showed them where they could stow away their stockpiles of food and their belongings and then let them get settled while he headed back outside to get the carpet moving. It was just in time too—black snow was beginning to fall.

“I think they’re here.” He called into the tent. “Just stay inside, I’m going to make the outside of the tent invisible. If you want to see outside there’s a window behind the curtain there and another in the bedroom where all your stuff is at. He hit himself and the tent with a quick disillusionment and rose into the air to get them moving.

There was at least twenty ships headed their way. He could only be thankful he’d gotten there when he had, or he might have arrived to find only corpses. He had assumed they would delay to give the men a chance to get down there trying to save their people and then just attack all of them at once, but it seemed that hadn’t been the plan at all. Zhao was on his way to butcher a small village of women and children, none of whom were benders or warriors. The man was a monster.
He turned the carpet to fly away from the approaching ships; it would do no good to be invisible if they got completely coated in soot—that would make them as visible as if there’d been no disillusionment charm at all. As it was, he had to keep casting cleaning charms on himself, the tent, and the carpet to keep them clean enough to pass unseen.
Reclaiming what was lost

Chapter Summary

Zuko, Iroh and company seek enlightenment, Harry, the gaang and the reunited water tribe make plans for the future, Sokka falls in love.

Guru Pathik opened his eyes and then quickly shut them again.

“I am filled with vast cosmic energy. I should warn you I will not go quietly.”

“Is this a temple or a nut house?”
“Show some respect to the guru.”

The guru cracked open one eye and peered at Iroh for a moment.

“Oh, it is you. Please tell me this is not your son…I’m pretty sure the dead are not supposed to walk the earth again after they have passed.”

“This is my nephew, guru Pathik.”

“Glad to hear it. Now, please to go away; I am meditating here.”

“We came here for a purpose, guru Pathik. I was hoping we could implore upon you to share some of your wisdom with us.”

The guru opened his eyes again and peered at the mass of Fire Nation soldiers in armor, and the odd mix of old men and one young boy who were ranged all about him and scratched his beard contemplatively.

“This is most unexpected.”

“This is a complete waste of time.” Zuko fumed.

“If that is your attitude before you even begin, then yes it is. Goodbye now.”

Zuko scowled and clenched his fists.

“Oh yeah? I’ll show you! I’ll master this enlightenment stuff no problem, and then I’ll see through that stupid airbender spirit’s tricks, capture the avatar, restore my honor, and you can’t stop me!”

“Ah, you are catching on already. The only one who can stop you is yourself.” Guru Pathik agreed placidly. He sighed and rose to his feet.

“I suppose if all of you are staying, it would be best to set up some ground rules. Rule the first—lose the armor. There are no enemies here but your own hearts, and your armor will not help you. Rule the second—this is a place of peace and contemplation; no carrying on and disturbing the harmony of the temple. Rule the third—you will all have to help harvest onions and bananas so there will be enough juice for everyone. Rule the fourth—if you decide that this is not a path you can walk, please to leave so you do not disrupt the journeys of others. Well? Go on then!” he ordered, while making
little ‘shoo shoo’ motions with his hands.

Zuko was already stripping out of his armor with a mulish look on his face, Tcho sent some of the soldiers to look for onions and bananas, while Iroh and Jee sorted out who was staying on the island for spiritual training and who was going back to the ship to do patrols.

Zuko, now stripped down to his tunic and pants, sat cross-legged on the ground in front of the guru and crossed his arms, daring him to refuse his services further.

The guru muttered something beneath his breath and sat down across from the irate teenager, then handed him a small bowl filled with liquid. “Here, drink up.”

Zuko sniffed the stuff suspiciously and took a careful sip, making an awful face as he did so.

“Onions and bananas.” He groaned weakly while sticking out his tongue.

“It helps. Now, let us begin. Tell me all you know about the chakras.”

“Chakras…uh…they’re pools of energy in your spine or something, right?” Zuko replied, distantly remembering a day long ago when Azula was telling him something about what she’d been reading about the Fire Sages.

“Yes, very good. Each chakra has its own energy and can become blocked by various things. What we will be doing is meditating and clearing the chakras one by one so the energy can flow freely. I can only guide, you must do the work. You must look within and be honest with yourself about the things that have caused your chakras to become blocked, and you must do the work to overcome these blocks—I cannot do it for you.” The guru warned. “Now, do you know anything about meditation?”

“I meditate every day.”

“Ah, yes, firebender, correct? What we will be doing for the foreseeable future will be a bit different than your fire meditations; we will be looking for the root of the blockages in your chakras and working to untangle them…and I will warn you now that this will take time and work. You are very tangled up indeed.”

Zuko’s jaws clenched as the never-ending mantra that always filled his thoughts began to sound in his mind at the guru’s words: weak, not good enough, without honor, failure, disgrace…

The guru sighed, feeling the tangled energy in the boy’s spirit wind up a bit tighter and snarl a bit more.

“Very tangled indeed.”

The rest of the men were sorted out, and so Iroh, Jee, Tcho, Nakamura and Ping, one of the soldiers who had decided to stay as well, sat themselves down around Zuko and the Guru to partake in the lesson.

Once the guru had satisfied himself that all present knew what the chakras were, how to meditate, and what they were trying to accomplish, he led them as they fell into a light meditative trance.

“First chakra, is earth chakra. It is located at the base of the spine. It is powered by the will to survive and is blocked by fear. Look inward and see your fears laid out before you…”
Hedwig’s sudden flight from the tent halted the conversations that had been going on around her.

“Why’d she leave like that?”

“Sifu Harry must be back!” Aang realized. He jumped to his feet and ran from the tent and began scanning the sky, Katara, Sokka, Toph and the others quick on his heels.

“There!” Sokka pointed.

A murmur went up around the camp as Harry suddenly appeared in mid-air, then a carpet formed under him, and a tent behind him perched on the carpet.

“Where is everyone?” Hakoda demanded. “He said he would bring them.”

“I’m sure he has a good explanation. He wouldn’t have just left without them.” Aang defended.

As they watched, Hedwig swooped in to land on his shoulder and began scolding him in between grooming his hair.

“Look! Peeking out of the tent…isn’t that Arnuk?” Sokka pointed.

“And that’s Mikka next to him. They’re there! They’re in the tent!” Katara agreed.

“Only Mikka and Arnuk?” Bato whispered, sounding devastated. “They’re all that remain?”

“No…there’s something we’re missing.” Aang insisted. “Look…he doesn’t look upset.”

Harry glanced down and saw a sea of anguished faces peering up at him.

“Relax! It’s bigger inside than it looks!” he was quick to assure them.

He brought the carpet in for a landing and jumped to his feet to hold one of the tent flaps aside. Arnuk and Mikka, the two littlest ones, ran out first, followed in ones and twos by the rest of the tribe.

The men of the tribe, having fretted for three days while they waited for their arrival, and having so recently feared the very worst, wept unashamedly as they embraced their wives and children, whom none of them had seen in the last two years.

Kanna was the last to exit, and she was immediately pounced upon by her son-in-law and grandchildren.

“Really now! All this fuss for little old me. As you can see, I’m quite well…though we owe a great debt to the spirit here.”

“I told you, my name is Harry.”

“He arrived just in time. Had he been even an hour later it may well have been too late. Black snow began falling as the last of us took shelter in his contraption here.”

“At least twenty warships, that I saw.” Harry spoke up. “Even if I hadn’t of stopped you, you would have gotten there too late to do anything. I almost got there too late to do anything.”

The grim and somber mood was suddenly broken when Harry smiled at Katara, Sokka, Aang and Toph and clapped his hands together.
“Alright, enough standing around being mushy, come help me unload this thing.”

“Good idea” Kanna agreed “Run along now. Not you, spirit”

“Harry. You can call me Harry, really. It is my name.”

Kanna ignored him as she motioned for the rest of the women and children to gather around. The men followed, curious as to what was going on.

“We made this for you during the journey. It’s a small token of our thanks for your timely intervention.”

She unrolled the mass of blue she had tucked under one arm and revealed a water tribe banner. It was solid blue with a design of a crescent moon and waves in a circle picked out in white.

“Are those all beads? Wow…you all really put a lot of work into this. It’s beautiful, thank you.”

“No, thank you, spirit. Our tribe might not even exist anymore if not for you. We owe you a tremendous debt.”

“You owe me nothing.” Harry insisted, then held up a hand when the tribe seemed ready to protest.

“Kanna welcomed me into her home when I arrived in this world, fed me and put me up for the night. The rest of you welcomed me as well. I wasn’t expecting to find myself in the middle of the south pole when I arrived and I knew nothing about this place or the people who dwelled here. I found both knowledge and shelter thanks to all of you, and since then I’ve found true friends in Sokka and Katara. If anything, I was simply repaying the debt I owed all of you. I’m keeping the banner though.”

“Silly spirit, that should go without saying, after we put so much work into it.” Kanna chided. “Now, we have food that will go bad if it isn’t eaten soon, so what do you all say to a feast?”

The gathered tribesfolk all cheered.

Guru Pathik watched the boy toss and turn in his sleep, sweat upon his brow as he was wracked by nightmares. He turned to Iroh and gestured for him to follow him to where they could speak privately.

“It is not working, is it?”

“What has happened to this child, Iroh? Since you’ve all been here, his chakras, far from being cleared, have only grown more tangled and clogged. He gets no sleep at night, while he’s haunted by phantasms of his own mind. Whatever it is, he clings to it so tightly. I fear whatever pain it is he harbors, he has grown dependent on his illusions for some measure of sanity.”

“Perhaps we should just let it lie then.”

“No. It is like a spiritual infection, this pain. It has grown so embedded, he no longer remembers what it is like to be free of it, but it is still hurting him afresh every day. I have watched and listened and have been monitoring him these past few days. Innocent comments, everyday situations, people who should be comfortable and familiar set off a cascade of protective delusion building. He is
turning most of his energies to maintaining these defenses, and they cost him more and more with every day that passes. He must work through these pains and come to terms with the memories that haunt him. This child cannot continue on this way.”

“What do you propose we do?”

“I propose we try getting him to talk during his meditations, and tease out what his unconscious mind is trying to tell him. Usually, one is able to work through these things on one’s own—must, in fact, to truly unblock the chakras. This time, he may be in too much pain to do this necessary work without assistance. We must probe and try to find a part of the tangle we can help him unravel which will hopefully lead to uncovering more of the hurts that haunt him. It may be the only way. Once he has begun the work of breaking down the walls of illusion, he will likely be able to complete the rest of the journey on his own. We must be his crutch until he finds his own strength to do so.”

Harry opened his eyes, and wished that he could occasionally sleep in, but years of being ready to wake at a moment’s notice to avoid the wrath of aunt Petunia, and then later forcing himself to wake even earlier so he could train in secret had made that impossible—unless he’d just wrung himself out by destroying a horcrux, but that seemed to be the only time.

The water tribe reunion party had lasted long into the night. There had been fish, and various other foods from the south pole, there had been music and storytelling. The story of the dance of the dead airbenders had been a great favorite, as had the story of their escape from the southern air temple, and the kids’ battle with Zuko and his men before escaping Tu Zin and travelling to meet up with the rest of the southern water tribe.

When they had finished, the men had taken turns telling of their exploits battling alongside the earth kingdom, freeing prisoners, disrupting supply lines and tribute ships and generally making life difficult for the Fire Nation. It had been a great night, but now it was dawn, and he was wide-awake in spite of having gotten very little sleep. He moved carefully to avoid waking Aang, who had followed him into his tent the night before, since Sokka and Katara had opted to stay in their father’s tent, and Toph had made her own tent of rock. Momo was there too, curled up in a ball above Aang’s head, and Hedwig was asleep on her perch in the corner.

“Harry?” Aang called sleepily.

He sat up, bleary and tousled, rubbing one eye with his fist.

He was freaking adorable—and looked very far from ‘kung-fu action Jesus’ at the moment.

“You can go back to sleep if you’re still tired; I just tend to wake up at the crack of dawn.”

Aang yawned once more and shook his head. “No, I’ll get up.”

He opted to wear his Air Nomad clothing since they were among friends who knew who he was, though he rubbed his hand unhappily through his hair once dressed.

“Still not used to it, huh?”

“I’ve been bald all my life. It’s weird.”

“I guess I can understand that. So…it’s early and everyone else is probably still asleep. What do you say to some meditation before breakfast?”
“Sounds good.”

They stepped outside and made their way silently through the camp, looking for a likely spot.

They were in a sheltered cove, surrounded by rock cliffs on both sides, with a small waterfall at one end that filled the air with mist. The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon.

“I’ve got an idea.” Harry announced, while pulling out the carpet, which he’d packed away the night before. “Hop on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Just right here. The carpet won’t go anywhere if I don’t tell it to; it’ll just hover here like a platform. We’ve got rocks to either side, water behind us, air above and below and the sun rising up to greet us.”

Once the carpet was in place hovering over the water, they sat down facing each other and got into their preferred meditative poses.

It was strange to find he had so much in common with a child monk—or maybe not that strange, really. Tai chi and meditation had become something of a fad over the last year or two, after he’d introduced them to Hogwarts and outlined the many benefits that came with them. Obviously, not everyone in the group was into it, but Harry could admit he’d been surprised by how many of them had taken to it so well.

He supposed that when one considered the Melting Pot was a secluded place, filled with people seeking to express themselves through art and literature, and forming committees to bring about change, harmony and social renewal through collective action, it did almost resemble a temple these days. Maybe it wasn’t so odd that he got on so well with a monk kid—he was practically one himself these days.

He became dimly aware of the sounds of the camp waking up, and then let his awareness of it fade to the background while he sought the calm center of his mind. He and Aang had been working on the exercises they’d found in one of the scrolls at the Southern Air Temple to help energy flow more easily through your body. It was quite similar to things he’d seen in meditation guides in his own world, and in some of the lessons at the ninja academy.

He felt a stir in the energy around Aang, who sat silently for a moment and then began to come out of his trance.

“What’s up?”

“I think I just had a vision.”

“Tell me about it.”

“There were ships...lots of them as far as I could see, and they were heading for a city made of ice.”

“The Northern Water Tribe? I guess we should have expected as much. Zhao’s probably just all the more determined to wipe the Water Tribe from the face of the earth after being denied his vengeance.”

“There was something else. The moon turned red and then disappeared.”

“Covered over with clouds?”
“No…gone…as in gone. I think something is going to happen to the moon, but I don’t know how that could even happen.”

“A really big ladder?”

Aang just looked at him.

“It was a joke…I was trying to cheer you up. You’re sitting there all somber and Bambi-eyed.”

“Bambi eyed?”

“Bambi is a baby deer from a story. His mother and he fled a forest fire and they escaped…but then she was killed by hunters.”

Harry winced as the kid’s eyes grew three times their usual size, wobbled and filled with tears.

“I just meant that you looked really sad. He was okay…Bambi, I mean. He made friends with a little rabbit and a skunk and they spent a lot of time frolicking in a sunny forest among the flowers. He eventually met a little doe and they had a baby and all was well. Really.”

“That’s a terrible story.”

“No, it’s really not. There are some sad parts, but overall it’s hopeful and tells a story about renewal. Please stop looking at me like that.”

“We should probably tell everyone about the ships and the moon.” Aang replied stiffly, not giving an inch.

“Yeah, let’s do that.” Harry sighed in return.

“We were thinking of having music night tonight, nephew. You should join us.” Iroh said with cheer.

“It’s a waste of time.” Zuko grumbled back.

“We are not searching for the avatar at this moment, nephew. We are here seeking spiritual guidance…and you know what they say, music is food for the soul. It might help.”

“No.”

“Nephew, I am going to ask you a question, and I would like you to answer me honestly. Why will you not play the tsungi horn anymore? You took to it so well—you were a natural. You were good at it, and seemed to take such delight in it…then one day you stopped and I have been unable to get you to so much as touch the horn since then. What happened between then and now?”

“Nothing happened uncle.”

“Something must have, to make you react so badly to something that used to bring you joy.”

“It’s just another failure in a long line of them. Why would I take joy in that?”

“Failure? Nephew, what are you talking about?” Iroh huffed, growing exasperated. “Did I not just say you were skilled and had a natural talent for it?”
“It’s never quite enough is it? Story of my life.”

“Nephew, something happened that made you feel this way. What happened?”

Zuko sighed irritably and made to leave. “Why are you harping on this? It’s not important, it’s just a stupid tsungi horn.”

“It’s important to me. Please tell me.”

“I was just being stupid, like always. I should have known better, really. It did seem to come so easily, I should have realized I was just fooling myself. Azula showed me that much. Everything always did come easily to her—I should have realized even the tsungi horn was no exception. I spent the better part of two days figuring out how to play ‘leaves in the river’. Azula got it right from beginning to end on the first try. She doesn’t play anymore either. Father pointed out what a useless waste of time it all was, unless she was planning to sit around entertaining like a travelling songster or something. He was right, of course. It’s all just nonsense.”

“Prince Zuko, your sister didn’t ‘get it right on the first try’. She had lessons—years of them, in fact, at the Royal Academy for Girls at your mother’s suggestion. She thought having a creative outlet would help make a lady of her. What’s more, your father is completely tone deaf. He can’t play or appreciate music to save his life. In fact, our father forbade him from playing music in his presence in an effort to spare his ears and his sanity. You both got your musical talent from your mother, though her instrument was the zheng. Unfortunately for your sister, they apparently didn’t have a teacher for it at the academy, so she was given a tsungi horn instead.”

Zuko laughed, though it was a surprisingly bitter and world-weary sound to come out of boy just sixteen.

“I should have known better, I suppose. Azula always lies.”

“Your sister is manipulative, often cruel, from what I remember of her. I don’t recall her being particularly untruthful.”

“That’s just because she’s so good at it. She lies all the time about everything…and I’m so stupid, I always believe her. She thinks it’s funny.”

“You sound like she lied about something in particular.”

“She lies about a lot of things…I mean, she actually told me grandfather wanted father to execute me! Crazy stuff. She’s so convincing though, so I’m always stupid and I always believe her, even though I know she lies.” His gaze grew abstracted and haunted, and he sat silently, lost in thought for a long moment. His next words came out as a whisper that he had to strain to hear. He wondered if Zuko was even aware that he had spoken.

“In the morning, mom was just gone.”

Iroh felt a cold chill up his spine as his nephew’s words hinted at the roots of what troubled him—execution, lies, and his mother’s disappearance. He himself wasn’t sure what happened to Ursa, she was just gone when he returned from the spirit world. He had asked around, but everyone was surprisingly mum on the subject of the former Fire Lady—and he’d still been too wrapped up in his own pain to really pursue the matter as perhaps he should have. He rubbed his palms together anxiously, as he wondered how best to pursue the tangle-field he’d just stumbled into, but then the guru called to them to resume their training.
Zuko’s shoulders and back grew tense, and his hands began to clench at his sides. He really didn’t like this whole ‘spiritual training’ thing. He’d been feeling sick and exhausted since they’d arrived at the temple. He was pretty sure the guru was poisoning the onion-banana juice. There was really no other explanation.

“All this navel-gazing is pointless, uncle. We should leave and continue our search for the avatar. We’re so out of touch way out here...what if someone else has found him and captured him already?”

“Nephew, you were the only one who was on their trail from the beginning, and you have tried several times to capture him without success. I find it unlikely that someone else would just come along and capture him in the short time we’ve been here. Forget about the avatar for the moment and put your mind to the task in front of you. Now, come along.”

“I don’t want to.”

Iroh turned to look back at Zuko, who looked mildly startled at having spoken thus.

“What are you afraid of, Prince Zuko?”

“I’m not afraid of anything!”

“If that were true, your earth chakra would be clear by now. We cannot move on until you have dealt with your fears.”

Zuko scowled and made to storm away, but his uncle’s words halted him.

“You are tearing yourself apart by not working through these things that trouble you so. Night after night you toss and turn, plagued by nightmares that you refuse to acknowledge or deal with during our sessions with the guru. Your own mind and spirit are telling you to let these things surface into the light of day so they can be burned away, and you, my nephew, may begin to heal. So far you have refused. You clutch their poison to you like a lifeline, and each day you grow more exhausted and more ill.”

“I told you, I’m fine.” Zuko growled before stalking away into the darkness.

Iroh sighed and slumped in place. He heard the sound of pebbles shifting behind him and turned to find the guru melting out of the shadows nearby, his eyes on Zuko’s tense angry form as he stomped off to the caves located nearby to be alone.

“I fear I have only made things worse.”

“I don’t think so. He’s is angry and defensive right now, it is true, but then he has been that way since he arrived. No, I think this may have been a push in the right direction. You forced him to speak aloud some of what troubles him—and now, having been spoken aloud, it will not be so easy to hide from. I think he has used rage and constant movement to keep from being forced to think on these things. Here, there is nothing else to distract him, and he is forced to deal with his inner demons. We will see how it goes.”

“Another journey already. Well, we knew things weren’t going to be easy.” Hakoda sighed.

“Is it really safe though? To take everyone to the North Pole? If Fire Nation is on their way there, won’t it just be more of what we left behind?” Kanna wondered.
“Where else can we leave everyone? I don’t know if it’s escaped your notice but everywhere nearby is either occupied territory, or it’s currently under dispute. I’ve heard tell Ba Sing Se is starting to strain at the seams from all the refugees streaming into it. There really isn’t anywhere else to go.” Hakoda pointed out.

“We can leave everyone at the Northern Air Temple.”

“Um, Aang…isn’t that where you told me your monks went for ‘advanced training’?” Harry interjected.

“Yeah.”

“None of the people here can protect themselves from the gas like you can.”

“Oh…I guess I didn’t think of that.”

“Gas? What are you two talking about? Share it with the rest of us.” Sokka spoke up.

“There’s a bunch of natural gas leaking up in a room in the very base of the temple. A master airbender can feel the differences between air that’s safe to breathe and gases that aren’t. To attain master level, one of the things you had to do was master that so that it became instinctive. It was never dangerous to any of us because we were constantly separating it out and dispersing it…but if no one’s been there for a long time…”

“The whole temple is probably full of natural gas and could be an explosion waiting to happen.”

“It’s coming out of cracks in the earth, you said?” Toph asked.

“Good idea, Toph.” Katara nodded.

“What is? She didn’t say anything!” Sokka sighed.

“She can feel out and seal up the cracks, maybe vent the gas elsewhere so it won’t be a danger to anyone in the temple.” Harry clarified.

“It’s a stone temple on a mountain, right? I guess I’ll be stuck there with everyone else while the rest of you are off battling Fire Nation at the North Pole.” Toph sighed irritably.

“You should come with us!”

“No thanks, Twinkletoes. I’d be completely useless there. No rocks, remember?”

“Not to mention you’d probably lose your toes trying to walk around barefoot.”

“And you’d be completely blind.” Katara realized.

“Bingo.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, there is a slight chance someone might go to the temple to check it out.” Harry offered as consolation.

“I almost hope they do! Think what I could do with a whole mountain at my disposal!” Toph cackled while rubbing her hands together eagerly.

“I guess that’s what we do then. We’ll start towards the North Pole. Kanna, you and the others will head off towards the Northern Air Temple when we draw level with it, and the rest of us will
continue onwards.

The mood in the tent was grim. They all realized that the water tribe as a whole could be wiped out in the coming days and weeks, but for the women and children sequestered away in the temple. If worse came to worse, they might be all that would remain.

Wanting to help lighten the somber mood, Harry turned to Aang and smiled.

“You and Katara should take the opportunity to get assessed by an actual master waterbender. I’ll admit I’m pretty curious to find out if you two are really as awesome as I think you are or if we’ve just barely scratched the surface.”

“That’s right, isn’t it?” Katara realized. “There may still be more to learn that we haven’t thought of. I’m so excited!”

“I expect both of you to go all out and really show them what you can do. Your success or failure will reflect on me as your teacher…and I can admit I’m egotistical enough to want bragging rights when you wow them.” Harry teased.

“We’ll do our best, we promise.” Aang assured him.

“Don’t think we’ve forgotten you, Sokka.” Hakoda spoke up. “You and I will be leading the fleet northwards.”

“I don’t know, Hakoda” Bato teased as he looked Sokka up and down and then tugged on his short ponytail. “He looks like a half-weaned cub to me.”

The rest of the men laughed gently, without malice, at Sokka’s indignant protests.

“He looks like a man to me…and he’ll prove it, won’t you, Sokka?”

Sokka beamed at his father, then nodded and tried to look manly.

Harry couldn’t help the faint wistfulness that he felt, watching the two of them interact. He wondered, as he often did when watching fathers and sons together, whether things would have been like that for himself and his own father. Sirius did his best to fill the void, and Harry knew he loved him, but it just wasn’t the same. Sirius would have his own son someday, and though he knew he wouldn’t mean to exclude him or treat him differently, he knew enough from his time with the Dursleys that it would inevitably happen.

He heard a sigh to his right and found Aang watching Sokka and Hakoda wistfully as well. He obviously wasn’t the only one mourning the dead and the ‘could have beens’ tonight.

Harry nudged him unobtrusively with his elbow and slipped him a drawing he’d made earlier after Katara had reamed him out about telling Aang stories about ‘dead baby animals’ and thinking it was funny. She hadn’t listened well when he’d tried to explain what he’d actually been trying to say.

Aang unrolled it and then stared at the drawing for a long moment, before he started snickering.

The drawing showed the moon sitting high up in the sky, while down below an unwieldy pyramid of chibi-fied Fire Nation soldiers strained to hold up a ladder, which was actually dozens of smaller ladders tied together haphazardly. Because of its tremendous length, the ladder was bowed and the end tilting back towards the ground, leaving tiny Commander Zhao, perched on the end and looking extremely pissed off, short of his mark.
“I get it now…a really long ladder.”

Aang rolled the picture up and tucked it away before turning a reproachful glare on Harry again.

“That story about the dead momma deer still wasn’t nice!”

“The story wasn’t the point, I was just explaining what I meant by ‘Bambi-eyed’.” Harry sighed, before digging out a second picture and handing it over. On it was Aang, seated in a flowery glade in a forest, and beside him Bambi. Both of them looked out at the viewer with identical mournful, liquid eyes, as though begging the big, bad world not to hurt them.

“Bambi” Harry pointed to the baby deer.
“Bambi-eyed.” Harry tapped the picture of Aang pointedly.

Aang rubbed the back of his head and smiled, looking a bit sheepish.

“Oh.”
“Yes, oh.”

“Oh my goodness! That is so adorable!” Katara suddenly squealed, nearly tearing the picture in her haste to grab it out of Aang’s hand.

“What is it?”

“That would be the baby deer with the dead mother you were screaming at me about earlier.”

Katara’s glee turned instantly to consternation.

“Oh.”

“Uncle…where is everyone?”

“Hmm? They went back to the ship to sleep. You seem to be feeling a bit better”

“Uncle! The ship is gone, as are all the men.”

“What’s all the shouting about?”

“Tcho, you’re still here? Where is everyone else?”

“Nakamura is meditating near the ponds, Ping and Li are in the statue room. I think everyone else went back to the ship. Would you like some juice, prince Zuko? I made a nice berry blend—no onions or bananas, I promise!”

“The ship isn’t there anymore! Everyone is gone!”

“Lieutenant Jee wouldn’t have simply left for no reason. I’m sure they’re around somewhere.”

“Uncle, I walked completely around the complex once I saw they were gone. They’re nowhere around. We’re stranded here!”

“This is most irregular.”

“Is that all you can say?”
“What would you have me say? Something must have happened that we are unaware of.”

“But what?”

“They were commandeered.”

“Shao, you’re here too? What do you mean they were commandeered?”

Shao held up a message. “I was heading back to the ship earlier. A river trawler came and met them on the water. They were boarded and then set sail. I sat by the edge of the water for a while to see if they returned, but all that came was this message.”

“Read it, Shao.”

“By order of Admiral Zhao, your ship has been commandeered for the war effort.”

“Is that all it says?” Zuko demanded. “Wait…Admiral Zhao? What do you mean Admiral Zhao! I arrested him and sent him back to Fire Nation to stand trial for neglecting his duties and interfering in my search for the avatar!”

“It seems he managed to slip out from under the charges.”

“And got promoted to Admiral on top of it.”

“It seems that way, yes.”

Zuko slumped in place as all the fight drained out of him.

“And now all of us still here at the temple are stranded for the foreseeable future.”

“Yes, it looks that way. Hopefully, whatever campaign Zhao has called everyone away for will be over soon. I’m certain Lieutenant Jee will return for us once he is able to.”

“How could my father do this? I told him…”

Iroh made to put a comforting hand on Zuko’s shoulder, but was rebuffed. Zuko staggered away back to the cave he’d been in earlier. He didn’t want company right now.

Zuko fell to his knees once inside, unable to muster up the will to keep standing. He’d had Zhao arrested back on Whale Tail Island and had sent him to his father. He’d explained everything—Zhao’s interference in his search, pulling the patrol ships to do so, which resulted in a string of victorious attacks against their bases and prison barges. He’d told him he was plotting to overthrow him as Fire Lord! And what had his father done? He’d released him and given him a promotion…while he himself, who had only ever tried to be a loyal and dutiful son, was burned, banished—an outcast and a laughingstock. Why? Why would his father do such a thing?

It was too much. All the nightmares that had plagued him since he’d arrived at the temple came rushing back with a vengeance.

He could no longer hide the truth from himself.

That night…the night his mother had disappeared…

His mother had killed his grandfather, Fire Lord Azulon. Azula hadn’t been lying; he really did tell his father to kill him.
His father…was going to do it.

A bone deep shudder wracked his body as he thought those treasonous, poisonous words.

He’d tried so hard to be a good son…a good prince. He’d tried and it never seemed to be good enough. He’d spent the last three years clinging to hope by the edge of his fingernails, searching the world over for any sign of the avatar.

He had decided that he had be out there, and there had to be some way he could defeat him and drag him back to lay at his father’s feet…because otherwise, his father had just thrown him away like month-old garbage for speaking out of turn.

It meant his father didn’t love him and maybe never had.

It meant nothing he could do or say or accomplish would change it.

Shaking hands rose to clutch at his temples in a vain attempt to quiet the thoughts spinning through his mind.

It was too much. Somewhere, he’d lost his ability to quiet them down and shut them out completely. It was this stupid island temple—it was too quiet, for one. Day after day sitting around contemplating his fears and survival certainly hadn’t helped.

The walls that normally held all of it away from his waking mind and let him function day to day had weakened. All this business with Admiral Zhao was just the final blow that crumbled them.

He threw back his head and screamed. It was the sound of a wounded animal, trapped and surrounded by predators with no escape in sight, and it echoed through the caves, magnifying and echoing back.

His grandfather had ordered him executed to punish his father for overstepping himself.

His father was just going to blow him away.

His little sister had taken it as a given that he would, and that he wouldn’t survive the night. More than that, she’d come to laugh about it to his face.

His mother had also taken it as a given that his father was going to kill him…but she had moved to stop it.

“Everything I’ve done, I did to protect you. Never forget who you are.”

He’d woken up that morning and the whole world had changed.

His cousin was dead, his uncle was broken.

His grandfather was dead, and his father became the new Fire Lord.

He’d gone from low-ranking prince, son of the spare, to being crown prince of the Fire Nation. His mother had disappeared—dead or fled, he didn’t know. No one talked about her—not the servants, not his father, not his sister. It was like she’d never existed.

It had been a lonely couple of years after that. Azula had Mai and Ty Lee. He himself had no one, really. His father had always been busy.

And that day, three years ago…his father had burned him and banished him and sent him searching for a guy no one had seen or heard of in a hundred years.

He was the crown prince. His father wouldn’t have been able to simply slay him there in front of witnesses and kept his throne for long. People would have been shocked and horrified. Uncle Iroh would have killed him where he stood.
He had banished him instead. He had never wanted or expected him to come back.

Had Azula not agreed to help him get a ship, he might have been executed for disobeying the terms of his banishment—even though he couldn’t exactly obey said terms without the means to get off the island.

Everyone had ignored his presence in the room, and just stared right through him while he ran from place to place trying desperately to find the means to leave.

They’d all understood what it meant—his scarring and banishment. Zuko was persona non grata, crown prince or not. The Fire Lord had thrown him to the wolves and cared not if he lived or died, but he had to make at least a token show of fairness because he was the heir and hadn’t done anything criminal, just stupid.

He’d spent the last three years trying to deny it. He had told himself again and again that if he just found the avatar and captured him all would be well.

He would have his honor back. He would be reinstated as crown prince and heir presumptive, because he would have proven himself worthy.

His father would love him.

It had all been a lie he’d told himself so he could sleep at night.

Azula had told him there would be a price for getting a ship to carry him on his quest to find the avatar. He had long thought it just another lie, because there had never been any price.

But there had, hadn’t there?

Uncle Iroh had gotten a crew together, retired and followed him into exile.

The war had gotten nastier since then.

Uncle was still respected, even after his failure at Ba Sing Se. Most of the generals and admirals had expected him to be Fire Lord someday, and that still carried weight, even though his younger brother had taken the throne. His uncle had kept plans that recklessly threw away their people’s lives to a minimum wherever he could, by suggesting alternative plans, and maintaining strict disciplinary measures towards soldiers who got too far out of line—men who raped and pillaged and destroyed everything in their path.

Under uncle’s leadership Fire Nation had been making slow but steady gains for years. They conquered, yes, but then they rebuilt and moved in colonists and ruled those areas they had taken, and they flourished.

He himself had been banished for speaking out against recklessly and heedlessly throwing away the lives of their soldiers—suicide missions that accomplished nothing but a momentary distraction.

Zuko had gotten his ship and a crew and a cadre of soldiers to follow him into exile.

The price was more of the very thing he’d spoken out against.

He had lived to go into exile, but in exchange thousands had lost their homes and their lives—Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom alike.

Since uncle had stopped overseeing the war, everything had accelerated. Their soldiers were now rolling over Earth Kingdom like an unstoppable wave, destroying everything in their path in the name of conquest. Refugees by the thousands were fleeing eastward to escape while the countryside burned.

He and uncle had been gotten rid of so they could just get on with it…and men like Admiral Zhao
rose to the highest ranks because they were happy to fight a war like that.

His father preferred Azula because she was the same way.

They both always told him he was too soft.
Azula was born lucky...he was lucky to be born. Isn’t that what his father always told him?

His anguished cry died out and he slumped forward to rest his forehead against the cool, damp stone beneath him.
He was trembling like a leaf, gasping like he’d just run a marathon. He felt sick and hollow and empty.
Most of all he was tired.
He was so, so tired.
His grandfather, his father, and his little sister despised his mere existence and wanted him dead.
His mother loved him enough to kill for him.
Maybe she shouldn’t have bothered.

Just beyond the edge of the cave, Iroh watched with anguished eyes as his nephew fell apart completely. He wanted to go to him, but guru Pathik kept a firm grip on his shoulder to keep him from doing so.
When Zuko finally collapsed into an exhausted, trembling heap the guru let go.

“Go to him now. He is at his lowest ebb. He will need your support. Make him talk about what is troubling him. Don’t feed him kind lies or sugar-coated platitudes. Give him truth and your love, that is all.

Sokka, Harry and Aang stood in a line in front of Hakoda on the shores beneath the Northern Air Temple. They had been told earlier that they too would be going through the ‘coming of age’ ritual along with Sokka, as befit their status as honorary Water Tribe. The test was designed for three people—Sokka had the misfortune to be the only boy coming of age in the tribe—everyone else was years older or years younger, and so it fell to Harry and Aang, as fellow ‘men of the tribe’ to go through it with him.
Sokka had been in charge of leading Hakoda’s ship through the treacherous icy waters, while Harry and Aang got to man the sails. Hakoda had sat in the bow of the ship and watched, but didn’t interfere. It was up to them to prove themselves.
Harry had never sailed a ship before, and probably wouldn’t again—they didn’t really make ships like this anymore in his world, for one; the fact that most wizards traveled by apparation, floo or flight was another.
He thought he’d like to, even so. It was a rush—the wooden deck creaking beneath your feet, the snap of the sails and groan of the ropes in your ears, the icy spray in your face while you struggled to keep the course and work as a team to overcome the shifting ice.
Sokka had been a masterful captain and had led them true. They were now on the rocky shores of the mountains, with the tribe gathered around to hear the results.
Hakoda made a paste of cuttlefish ink and marked each of their foreheads.
Sokka was given the mark of the wise, Harry the mark of the brave, and Aang the mark of the trusted.
They were greeted with much manly backslapping and ruffling of hair when it all was over.
It was a short celebration—it was now time for everyone to part ways.

Sokka and the rest of the men of the tribe, along with Katara, would now continue on by ship to the North Pole. Aang and Toph would be heading to the temple to clear away gas and seal it from leaking back in, and Harry would transport the women and children in once it was deemed safe. Once everyone had been unloaded, Aang and he would join the others at the North Pole while Toph, the women and children set up a camp of sorts in the temple.

It was a sad parting for all involved. They’d only just been reunited after years apart, and now had to be separated once more.

Harry took Sokka aside while everyone was saying their goodbyes and unpacking their belongings from the ship and had him follow him into his room in the tent.

“I have a present for you before you go. You’re now officially a man of the tribe, and you’ve also reached a point as a student of the sword where I don’t really have anything more to teach you—the only thing you really lack now is experience, and that will come with time.”

Sokka was beginning to look rather despondent, so he quickly clarified.

“That doesn’t mean we won’t be sparring anymore, or that we won’t be patrolling together anymore or anything like that. It just means that I think you’re ready to move on from wooden swords.”

Sokka’s face began to brighten in hope.

Harry gestured to the futon, which had a long, wrapped bundle on it. It was a present, after all, so it seemed weird to just leave it lying out. He had transfigured some of Appa’s fur into a dark blue cloth to wrap the sword in, as well as some white cord to tie the bundle up.

Sokka knelt down and untied it. His hands were shaking a little, but Harry didn’t let on that he noticed.

“This belonged to an ancestor of mine. I found it among the things I inherited from my parents. He had traveled to a distant land and studied with a sword master there, and then had this made for him when his master thought him ready. It’s supposed to be made from metal taken from a stone that fell from the heavens. It’s yours now. Use it well and with honor.”

Sokka pulled the sword from the sheath and grew misty-eyed and filled with wonder, like a small child at Christmas.

“Wow… Space Sword!”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh—it was such a very Sokka thing to say.

“Holy hell…look at this place!”

“Yeah. It’s a lot different than the South Pole, isn’t it?”

“I’ll say. Damn, I feel a lot better about our chances now. I was expecting another small village with a couple of igloos—not winter wonderland ice palace city of wow.”

“Winter wonderland ice palace city of wow?” Aang laughed. “You really have a way with words, Sifu Harry.”
“It’s a gift. Oh, look, they’re waving to us. I think I see Katara down there.”

“Yeah, there she is.” Aang agreed as Appa turned in towards the ice field down below to make his landing. Aang, being Aang, couldn’t wait that long. He leapt off Appa’s head with a gleeful shout. Harry shrugged and leapt out as well. He didn’t flutter as much on the way down—something which the people down below noticed and grew concerned over. One of the water benders, in an effort to be helpful, made some water rise up, apparently to catch him. He took far too much delight in twisting out of the way, running down the column of ice, leaping off and flipping, to land in front of them, nearly as softly and quietly as Aang, who was more air than boy sometimes.

“Thanks for the assistance, but as you can see, it really wasn’t necessary.”
“Show off.” Katara muttered.
Harry just smirked at her. “I wouldn’t have jumped if I didn’t think I could land safely.”

“So…this is the avatar.”

Harry turned his attention to the white-haired man who had spoken. He was a tall man, with a stern face, a thin moustache and a small goatee. The top of his head was bald though his hair hung long in the back. He had pale blue eyes, the color of arctic ice, which flicked over Aang and then Harry in turn, and seemed to find them both wanting.

“Aang, Harry, this is Master Pakku.”

Harry smiled brightly and rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “Oh?”

His smile only widened when Katara smiled a wolfish grin that looked terribly out of place on her otherwise demure face.

Harry threw up his arms, threw back his head and whooped excitedly, then grabbed Katara and Aang’s hands and danced them around in a circle.

Aang looked happy enough to dance around for no apparent reason, but he also looked confused.

“You’re a water-bending master, Aang!” Harry explained.

“It doesn’t work like that.” Pakku interjected irritably.

“Sure it does, they were training partners and learned together. Aang had already mastered one bending style, so he had an easier time of it overall, but Katara caught up and even surpassed him in some ways, though he excelled in some parts that gave her trouble. If Katara is a master waterbender, so is Aang.”

They stopped dancing around, and Harry hugged both of them to his side, his pride in their accomplishments obvious to see.

“I wish I could have seen your assessment.”

Katara frowned and crossed her arms, and sent a disgruntled look Master Pakku’s way.

“I had to call him out and challenge him to even get him to give me a chance. They don’t allow girls to train as waterbenders up here.”

“I told you, stubborn girl, our women learn to heal.” Pakku grumbled in turn.
“You can heal with water too? That’s great! How have your lessons in that been going?”

Katara looked startled. “I haven’t been taking lessons with the healers. I’ve been sitting in with Master Pakku’s classes. What they do is a lot different from what we’ve been doing.”

“You are now. It’s an amazing and valuable skill, and one we haven’t even tried to explore because I didn’t even know it was possible. You should definitely take advantage of such teaching while we’re here.”

“What about Master Pakku’s lessons?”

“Do you have any objection to Aang sitting in on your lessons, Master Pakku?”

Pakku frowned down at Aang, who smiled disarmingly. That will be fine, I suppose.”

“But…” Katara grumbled. She’d had to fight for her right to even be included in those lessons, and now she was just being shooed away.

“You can trade notes when we move on. Aang can show you what he picks up of Northern Water style, and you can teach him to heal. It’ll be great!”

“You want me to teach Aang to heal?”

“Master waterbender…that means you’re qualified to teach others. Besides, remember when we were talking about the two sides of every element? You’ve both spent a lot of time honing the tsunami and the hurricane; it would be nice to supplement that with the still pond and the trickling stream.”

“You heard Master Pakku though—it’s girls’ work.” Aang objected.

“Aang—I’ve seen the statues of your past lives. Half of them were women. Now run.”

“Huh?”

He realized then that Katara was cracking her knuckles and looking ready to rumble.

“Eep!”

“Get back here and face me, Aang!”

Harry smiled brightly at Master Pakku and the others as Aang ran off with Katara in hot pursuit.

“So…this city of yours is amazing. Are you and your students responsible for maintaining it?”

“Among other things, yes. Why don’t you come along. Someone can show you to the quarters that have been set aside for you and the rest of our guests.”

“Sure, just let me feed Appa real quick. It was a long flight. I’m sure he’s hungry.”

The group stirred, wondering where he was planning to find food for a giant flying bison in the middle of a courtyard made of ice in the center of a city made of ice. Harry ignored them and withdrew a scroll which he unrolled partway to expose a intricate seal, which he tapped with his fingertips. A couple of bales of hay popped out of the seal and landed before Appa, who immediately began inhaling it. The tribesmen stood frozen, while they tried to wrap their minds around the fact that hay had just appeared out of nowhere. When Master Pakku looked back at the
scroll, he saw the seal had vanished, though there were several more just like it elsewhere on the scroll.

“Appa needs a lot to eat and there really isn’t much around here for him. I took the precaution of stocking up on stuff he likes and packing it away for times when he’s unable to forage for himself.”

Appa rumbled and licked Harry in a friendly manner—which meant Harry’s entire front got soaked by giant flying bison spit. “Yeah, thanks Appa.” He half-laughed, half-groaned in response, before casting a quick cleaning charm over himself to remove it. Master Pakku twitched slightly at the sight and then turned away without another word.

“This way.”

Momo and Hedwig both made themselves at home on Harry’s shoulders as he followed after him.

Harry continued to be amazed, as they walked through the city. Everything was built on monumental scale and all of it was completely made of ice, from the huge thick walls, to the streets and canals that ran through the city, the boats that traveled them, the houses, meeting rooms, and palace. On top of the sheer size and scale of the city was the number of people. The Northern Water tribe didn’t count as a large city population by the standards of his own world, but there were still at least fifty times the number of people there than there were in the Southern Water Tribe.

Harry wondered if the South Pole had once looked like this place, until repeated raids and loss of their water benders had reduced them to the small collection of tents and igloos that he’d seen when he arrived.

It also made him wonder just what the hell was wrong with the Fire Nation. They had genocided Aang’s people, and completely wiped them and their culture off the face of the earth, with the exception of Aang himself. They had all but wiped out the people and civilization of the South Pole, and were headed here to finish the job. They had been doing their best, apparently, to completely eradicate the Earth kingdoms and their civilization and people for the last hundred years as well.

His own native Britain had once had an empire that spanned the globe, but they hadn’t eradicated the people and cultures they’d encountered. They had changed them, certainly, but they themselves were changed in small ways as well. India was a good example—it had been called the jewel in the crown of the British Empire for a reason. They had found much there among the people and culture of India that they found fascinating and worthwhile, and had quite happily imported much of what they liked back to England, while sharing their own ideas on how things should ‘properly’ be done. India was no longer a British colony, but it still maintained strong ties with Britain, and many of its people had come to Britain to become citizens. All over England one could find restaurants selling Indian cuisine alongside more traditional British fare, shows celebrating Indian music and dance, and Indian culture, literature, religion and history was studied in the universities.

Fire Nation didn’t seem to see anything worthwhile or fascinating in the peoples and cultures of the world around them, only their own—and, seeing nothing worthwhile, they thought nothing of destroying it wholesale.

That was really going to be the most difficult part of the whole sorry mess—the healing afterwards.

He was certain the people of Fire Nation, those who were just living their lives in the home country,
who weren’t soldiers or generals or royalty, had been indoctrinated about the war and the ‘great march of progress’ or some such nonsense. They probably accepted it wholesale, because the war wasn’t where they were—it was just words.

They didn’t see the fleeing refugees, the burned villages, or the bones and ashes of the dead. They didn’t see the eerie melancholy of the empty air nomad temples or hear their echoing silence.

They hadn’t witnessed the bittersweet reunion of the Southern Water Tribe or their subsequent parting.

So, they were just folks, like any others, living their lives, going about their business, enjoying the prosperity that came from living in the heart of a nation who was beneficiary of the spoils of a world-wide war. He very much doubted any of them realized just how very much the rest of the world hated and despised them for the pain and suffering their people had unleashed across the rest of the world, and they were the ones who would suffer in the aftermath when the rest of the world looked for an answer to their pain and suffering.

Harry shook off his musings and settled his attention fully on Master Pakku as he bragged about their city and their people. He should remember to thank Hermione someday—he’d gotten so much practice pretending to listen to her yammering while his mind was elsewhere making plans that it was second nature now to monitor the outside conversation and seem attentive even when he was miles away.

“It really is an amazing place, Master Pakku. You should be justly proud of it.”

“We are.” Pakku agreed smugly.

A yelp and a splash of water drew both their attention and they gazed down the street to see Sokka pulling himself out of one of the watery canals, while a pretty girl with white hair sailed past on an ice gondola.

“Idiot boy.”

“Teenage boy.” Harry corrected with a laugh. “And she’s certainly quite the distraction.”

“Princess Yue is not a distraction for the likes of him.”

“He’s the son of the chief of the Southern Water Tribe, and I’m guessing she’s the daughter of the chief of the Northern Water Tribe. Sounds like a match made in heaven to me.”

Princess Yue’s gondola drew even with them and then sailed past. She was smiling the secret smile of a girl in love, and she was blushing.

“It looks to me like the lady herself concurs.” Harry added once she was past.

“Hmph.” Pakku muttered as he led them onward.

When they drew even with Sokka, who was shivering and trying to wring out his parka, Master Pakku grumbled and then waved his hand, extracting the water from the fur and sending it back to the canal.

“I’m sure your friend can lead you from here. I do have other things to attend to.”
“I understand. Thank you for your time, Master Pakku.”

“Yeah, uh, thanks for the uh…” Sokka waved a hand to indicate his now dry parka.

“Mmph.” Was all Pakku said in response before heading off in another direction, and leaving the two boys alone.

“Friendly guy.”

“Yeah. He was apparently supposed to marry gran-gran years ago.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. We didn’t even know she wasn’t originally from the South Pole. They were engaged and then she just upped and ran away one day, went south, married grandpa and had mom. He never married. He said she was the ‘love of his life’. Apparently Katara’s necklace that mom gave her was actually gran-gran’s betrothal necklace that he made for her.”

“Poor guy…though that’s weird, isn’t it? She ran away and married someone else, yet she kept the betrothal necklace and passed it down as a keepsake? You’d think, if she had such objections to marrying the guy that she would have left it behind when she left. In my world people give engagement rings. If the girl decides she wants out, it’s customary to give the ring back since it represents the promise to marry, you know, kind of a ‘sorry, time to move on, buddy’ kind of deal.”

“Yeah, it is weird, isn’t it? Then again, I suppose girls are weird—even gran-gran apparently.”

“Mmmm. Speaking of girls…princess Yue, huh? You certainly aim high.” He teased, while pretending to punch at him. Sokka blushed and shoved back, which just made Harry laugh.

After a moment, Sokka’s merriment faded and he slumped in place.

“I haven’t gotten a chance to really talk to her yet, and every time I see her I keep making a fool of myself.”

“Let me share a little secret with you. If the girl likes you back, they think it’s cute when a guy is falling all over himself trying to get their attention. If she doesn’t like you back, she’ll think you’re an idiot and want nothing to do with you. The good news is, Yue seems to think it’s cute, which means she likes you back.”

“She likes me too? How could you tell?”

“She was smiling and blushing when she passed me and Master Pakku on her boat. She’s totally in to you.”

“Yes!” Sokka cheered as he did a little dance right there.

“So, tell me all about her.”

They turned their steps towards the lodgings they’d all been given for their stay. Sokka spent the whole trip rhapsodizing about Yue’s hair and eyes and how cute she looked when she laughed at him being an idiot, while Harry listened, made sarcastic comments and poked fun. When the manly bonding was done, they put their heads together to plan out how they were going to arrange
opportunities for Sokka and Yue to meet up out from under prying eyes.

Harry slowed to a stop and a big smile broke across his face.

“What? What is it?”

“The winter solstice, it’s tomorrow! There’s supposed to be a feast tonight to celebrate the reunion of the tribes, and the arrival of the avatar, right?”

“Yeah, and?”

“We find a chance to talk to her during the feast, and tell her about how we’re going to be dancing and how it’s a sacred ritual and what have you. Then, we ask if she wants to dance with us.”

“Which will mean spending time with us while we teach her the dance, and then more time while we’re actually dancing! That’s a great idea! Plus, if any more dead people show up, she might get scared and need a big, strong, manly arm to support her. It’s perfect!” Sokka enthused.

“Hmm…you’re right, she might. Looks like you’re out of luck, man.”

“Yeah, I…hey! No running away, come back here and face me, you bastard!”

Harry ducked out of reach of Sokka’s arms and took off running, laughing, while Sokka gave chase. Battle would be on them all soon enough; it was nice to just be a couple of teenage boys for a while.
Winter Solstice

Chapter Summary

Harry and the gaang settle in at the north pole, make friends and dance, and then fight a war. Zuko contemplates his navel some more and gets a haircut.

“So, how do I look?” Harry asked, as he held out his arms to model his new clothes.

“Like a member of the water tribe! Nice threads.” Sokka nodded.

“One of the ladies gave them to me. Your father and the others apparently told them I’m alone in the world, and running around in borrowed clothing from the Earth Kingdom.”

“Well, everyone was wondering why an earth spirit was travelling with us. If there had been more time, they probably would have tried to whip you up an outfit like Aang’s—it still would have been blue, of course; we don’t make yellow or orange dye.”

“So everyone now thinks I’m an air spirit that’s travelling with all of you?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Okay, I’m all ready to go!”

Sokka and Harry turned to find Aang standing in the doorway that led to the washroom. He was still wearing his air nomad clothing, and he’d taken time to ‘freshen up’.

“Aang…you shaved your head!” Sokka spluttered.

Aang nodded, his face serious.

“I’m tired of hiding who I am…plus, I was thinking that it might actually be better this way. We know the Fire Nation is headed here. I’m probably going to have to fight them, which means there’s a chance some of them are going to get a good look at me. They’ll see an air nomad. If I stayed in disguise, they’d pass along what I look like with hair, won’t they? Besides…you can always just hairbend me again later, right?”

“Alright.”

“That’s it? Just alright?” Sokka demanded.

“He makes a good point, and he’s right. Plus, it’s obvious he’s actually thought through things and didn’t just do this impulsively without thinking of the ramifications. I didn’t make him grow out his hair trying to be a jerk, I was just thinking of our safety.”

“The feast is about to start, are all of you ready. Aang! You shaved your head.” Katara stuttered in surprise. She studied him a moment and then smiled.

“The time for hiding is over. The world needs to know that you’re back and working to set things right.”
She ran her hand gently over Aang’s now-bald head, which prompted a furious blush on the young boy. Katara then sighed a bit wistfully.

“I did like your hair though.” Aang’s blush disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, and he began to look rather sad.

“This is who I am.” Aang replied quietly.

Katara seemed to realize she had inadvertently hurt his feelings.

“Who you are is just fine.” She was quick to reassure him.

Aang smiled, but he still seemed to be feeling a bit insecure. “We should probably go.”

Katara nodded and led the way out of their quarters.

As Harry followed behind the others, he could only wonder if there was something in the water here. Maybe they should call this place the winter-wonderland-ice-palace-city-of-love instead.

The northern water tribe's feast hall was an impressive sight. It was a huge, cavernous room that was, like everything in the city, made entirely of ice. Layers of furs surrounded the many tables scattered across the room, to give a warm and somewhat comfortable seat to all the diners. Gleaming pillars of ice dotted the room, each decorated with swirls and stylized waves, each pillar holding up part of the enormous vaulted roof. A long table, slightly higher than the others, sat at one end of the room, and at it sat the northern and southern chiefs and their seconds, as well as master Pakku. Sokka looked around to see if he could spot Yue anywhere. He found her at last, standing with a boy who looked to be a bit older than himself. He had a petulant mouth and looked like a jerk.

"What's with you?" Harry asked quietly.

"Some jerk is over there bothering Yue."

"Does she have a boyfriend?"

"Does she look happy to be talking to that guy?"

Harry looked where Sokka was pointing and saw the two standing just out of sight of the crowd. Yue didn't look happy, but she had a polite, attentive expression while the guy, whoever he was, seemed to be dressing her down about something or other. She looked slightly resigned, and seemed to accept he had a right to do so. Harry frowned.

"Does she have a brother?"

"No. I'm pretty sure she's an only child."

"Hmm. Hey, why does she have white hair anyway? Every single water tribe person I've seen has dark hair, except for her."

"I’m not sure. I like it though. Speaking of which…Yue seems to be free. I should go invite her to dance with us. Wish me luck."

"Luck." Harry, Aang and Katara said in unison.
“She’s not coming, is she? She just said she would to be nice. She’s off somewhere being… princessy. She thinks I’m an idiot…”

“Geez, Sokka…you’re not exactly Mr. smooth, but I doubt you sent her screaming for the hills.” Katara sighed.

“Yeah, relax.” Aang echoed.

“Easy for you to say. You’re not even listening…you and Harry are too busy doing…whatever it is you’re doing.”

“Airbender training.”

“It’s an ancient form taught by my people. Don’t you remember the last time we were dancing?” Aang added.

“Honestly, I try not to think about it too much. It’s kind of freaky, you know? Dead people shouldn’t be up running around…or dancing.”

“They came to say goodbye. That’s perfectly acceptable.” Harry replied absently.

“Why are you even bothering with this? You’re not an airbender.”

“It never hurts to learn something new, and this form is so different from the others I know that it really adds a whole new dimension to my fighting style.” Harry answered placidly as he and Aang circled and twisted around one another.

The two boys slowed to a halt, facing one another and Aang beamed.

“You’re really starting to get the hang of it.”

“My progress is all due to the excellence of my teacher…Sifu Aang.” Harry replied, bowing.

Aang smiled happily and bowed back.

The sound of clapping drew their attention. Princess Yue and another teenage girl were standing on the top of the steps leading down into the hall they’d commandeered for their dancing practice.

“That was very good. You all do seem to have a variety of skills. We’re not late, are we?”

“Not at all, as you can see, we were just doing our own thing. And who is your friend?” Katara answered.

“Everyone, this is Tokka. I told her what I was coming here to do and she thought it sounded like fun.”

“Pleased to meet you.” The girl with Yue said cheerfully. She was a pleasant looking girl with dark hair done up in elaborate braids and beads—which seemed to be the norm among the Northern Tribe, much different from Katara and Kanna’s simple braid and hair-loopies style.

“Welcome, both of you. The more the merrier, I always say.”
"Say…princess Yue? Can I ask you a question?" Harry spoke up. Yue looked at him a moment and sighed rather ruefully.

"You want to know why my hair is white?"

"Well…yeah." Harry agreed.

"I was very ill when I was just a small baby. The healers did everything they could, but nothing worked. My father was beside himself with worry, and in a desperate bid to save me, he took me to the spirit oasis. The moon and ocean spirits' mortal forms are there. He implored them to save me and submerged me in the pool with them. Tui, the great spirit of the moon saved my life and healed me. My hair was white when he pulled me from the pool and it's been that way ever since… Um…are you two alright?"

"The moon and ocean spirits' mortal forms are here?" Aang said worriedly.

"Yes, why?"

"Aang had a vision of the moon disappearing. Neither of us could figure how such a thing could even be accomplished. I guess now we know." Harry mused. "When we're finished here, if I may, can I put up some security around the oasis? Something to let me know if anyone tries to get in there?"

"I'll take you there myself. If anyone were to manage to get in there…"

"All the waterbenders would lose their powers." Katara finished, sounding horrified.

"The great spirits should be able to protect themselves, right?" Sokka tried to cheer them up.

"No, actually they can't. That's why they're in a hidden, protected place. Their mortal forms are two fish. Tui is a white fish with a black dot on her head and La is a black fish with a white dot. Their spirits fuel all the waterbenders in the world and regulate the tides, but their mortal forms are helpless." Yue disagreed.

"Great." Harry groaned, rubbing his head. "So, shall we get started? The sooner we get this down the sooner we can go protect the moon and ocean." he said determinedly. After what had happened with the Autumn Equinox, he was really curious about what, if anything, would happen this time.

Sokka, Katara and Aang got into position for the autumn equinox dance.

“Different dance, guys. There’s a different dance for each season. Winter solstice is a circle dance, not a square.

“So we have to learn a whole new dance? Man, at this rate I’m going to be a ballroom champion by the time the year is over.”

“We’ll just call you dancing queen.”

“King. Dancing king.” Sokka corrected irritably.

“Everyone in a circle boy girl boy girl, and I’ll get the music started.”

“Wasn’t your music spirit prison yellow before?”
“This is music for the winter solstice…it’s funny how it worked out, now that I think about it. I have a yellow cube for autumn, and we did the autumn equinox dance at the southern Air Temple. I have a blue cube for winter solstice, which we’re doing at the North Pole among the Northern Water tribe.”

“What do you have for spring and summer?”

“Green and red. I guess Spring equinox we’ll be dancing in the Earth Kingdom.”

“That would mean summer solstice in the Fire Nation.” Sokka said warily.

“Well, we do have to head there eventually don’t we? It would be fitting as well—these dances are all about cycles and balance and the bonds that hold everything together. We have to do more than stop the war to heal the world…maybe these dances will help in some small way.”

“It’s a beautiful idea…it would be nice if it were true.” Katara mused.

“Well, let’s see, shall we?”

“Second chakra is the water chakra. It is centered in your sacrum.”

“Sacrum?”

“Your, ahem, groin area, young prince.”

“Oh.”

“It runs on pleasure and is blocked by guilt. What are the things you feel guilty of? This is what you should be concentrating on while you search within.”

Zuko, Ling, Pi, Tcho, Nakamura, Sho and Iroh were seated in a circle around guru Pathik on a flat rock sticking out of a pond, backed by a waterfall that overlooked the ocean. While the view was lovely, given that it was winter, it wasn’t actually the most pleasant place to be. Zuko shivered a bit and closed his eyes.

What did he feel guilty of?

His mother’s face as she turned away that night, covered in a long cloak.

“Everything I’ve done, I’ve done to protect you. Never forget who you are.”

It was his fault she was gone—dead or fled into the night. If he’d just been better, smarter, stronger…

Unbidden, another memory from his childhood floated to the surface. He and his mother had been seated together by the pond in the garden of the royal palace. They often spent the afternoons there, watching the turtle-ducks and feeding them.

“Hey mom, watch how Azula feeds the turtle-ducks!”

He had then picked up a rock and dropped it on the nearest one, a baby, which began squawking in distress as the rock dunked it under the water. His mother had gasped in horror and turned to him with an angry look on her face.

“Zuko, how could you?”
Just then, the mother turtle-duck had attacked him. She had lunged up out of the water and clamped down on the nearest thing in reach, his foot. It had hurt too. He had started screaming and flailing around, but the mother turtle-duck wouldn’t let go, no matter what he did. His mother had gone from angry to concerned in an instant, and helped get her off. Once everything had quieted down and the turtle-ducks had all fled to the other side of the pond, they had retaken their seats.

“Why did she do that?”

“That’s how moms are when you attack their babies. They get all ‘grrr’” she growled as she started tickling his sides. “And then you better watch out.”

“Would you, mom?”

“Of course. You are my son. I would do anything, and gladly pay the price.” Her fierce demeanor had melted back into her usual gentle smile and she had suggested they find Azula and go have lunch.

“That’s how moms are when you attack their babies.” Did that mean…it wasn’t his fault?

“That’s how moms are…” It didn’t really make everything better—his mother was still gone, had been for years. It did help ease the burden of guilt he’d carried unknowing since then. It was like a huge knot was slowly unraveling and he could breathe again.

“There is a strange energy afoot tonight. The spirits are moving.” Guru Pathik mused.

Zuko slowly started coming out of his trance, blinked and looked around. The others were all peering around with puzzled looks on their faces.

He could feel it then, a cold breeze that wafted across his skin that sent goosbumps down his spine.

“It’s the winter solstice. Could that have something to do with it?” Nakamura wondered.

“Is it? I have not been keeping track.” Iroh shrugged.

The darkness around them seemed to have a palpable weight to it, and Zuko’s internal fire seemed to be at a low ebb indeed—a spark, where normally there was a flame.

It was the longest night of the year—the sun’s rays would not be felt on the earth for hours yet—dawn was a long time away.

A few thin, wispy clouds drifted away, and the moon emerged in all her cold glory to illuminate the world around them in a wash of silver. Cold fire—the reflected rays of the sun, touched by the power of water, for the moon was mistress of the tides. Then the tide began to roll in with a vengeance.

The pond around them began to ripple and surge and the colorful fish that made their home in it began to move in unison, as though they were dancing there in the water. The ocean threw itself against the rocky shores and leap up into the air in an explosion of spray and mist, filling the world around them with a rainbow glitter as the drops caught the moonlight and refracted it.

Hundreds of miles away three boys and three girls danced in a plaza of ice in the center of the north pole, with the smell of the ocean around them, and the moon beaming her cold light down on them. In ones and twos, the waterbenders of the tribe drifted out to the plaza to join them and the circle widened, then widened again as the remainder of the tribe joined in.
Miles away from there, a mixed group of women and children danced on top of a mountaintop, not knowing why they did, just that their spirits demanded it of them.

Far to the south, the Foggy Swamp came alive and danced, and her children, who sheltered in her depths danced with her.

To the west, an old woman danced alone in a forest beneath the full moon and wept as the moon called to her to come home.

She fell to her knees and cried out her fury to the moon.

“How can I? I am old and alone! They are gone! My tribe, my family! I am the last! They took us and held us in a hot, dry prison and we died, everyone! Everyone but me!”

“Not alone. Not the last. Come home to me. Take your vengeance so you may rest your weary heart.”

The old woman trembled, prostrate in the moonlight.

This very night, she had planned to enact her vengeance—she’d had her targets all picked out, and ready to dance to her tune. She would return to them threefold what they had done to her and to her people.

“Innocent. Punish the guilty.”

Still she trembled, undecided. Her hatred had twisted and burned in her heart for so long, sustaining her, she was no longer certain who she was without it.

“Come home”

A breeze ruffled against her face. It smelled of arctic winds and biting snow, the icy ocean and warm furs. A choking sob rose up in her throat like a wave and she cried out to the night.

“Please. Please…”

She was no longer sure just what she was asking for. All she knew was that she had been alone with her pain for a very long time.

In the icy plaza, the dancers slowed to a halt and stood beneath the moon, waiting. The silence of the night was broken by a crack like thunder, and still they waited.

The old woman lifted her tear-streaked face at the clap of thunder in the forest and gazed up at the stranger in blue.

“Hama of the Southern Water Tribe?”

She nodded, still weeping. The stranger knelt beside her and wrapped her in his cloak, then they both disappeared, leaving the forest silent and empty once more.

They reappeared in the icy square, where Yue stood, alone at the center. She was ethereal and otherworldly, her white hair sparkled like moonlight on fresh snow.

Hama collapsed to the ground, and great wracking sobs shook her wizened frame.

“I’ve been alone…for so long.”

Yue approached, gliding over the ice underfoot as if she were no more substantial than mist, and her voice echoed with something other when she spoke.

“Never alone, beloved child, for I have been with you always.”

Far away, at the Eastern Air Temple, eight men stood along the shore under the moonlight and watched the seas calm, then explode once more in a final eruption of glittering spray which filled the night air with ephemeral stars before quieting once more. The eerie energy that had filled the night drained away and lay quiescent, though they could still feel it there, waiting, just beneath the surface.

“Prince Zuko, you’re crying.”
Zuko reached up and felt the tears that were leaking down his face and wiped them away, before turning to look at his uncle. “So are you.”

“So I am.” Iroh realized. The other men were in a similar state— all but the guru who seemed as distant and inscrutable as ever.

Zuko took a deep breath of the sea air, held it, then let it out again slowly, and felt his whole body relax. He felt strange—empty, as though he’d just been scoured from the inside out. Without another word, he headed into the temple to the room he’d claimed as his own and fell asleep. He slept deeply through the night, untroubled by night terrors for the first time in years, and woke when the sun rose, signaling the start of the new day.

The whole of the Northern and Southern water tribes currently at the north pole, and guests, gathered in the large meeting hall in the palace in the center of the city. Last night’s surprise solstice dance party had not only returned one of their own thought lost decades ago—Hama was the last of the Southern Tribe’s water benders who had been captured left alive—it had also shown everyone the full extent of the threat currently bearing down on them. The Fire Navy fleet numbered at least a hundred war ships—each complete with catapults, grappling hooks, and hundreds of fire benders. They were making their final approach to the North Pole and would be there soon.

Those men who were going to be fighting the invaders were suiting up and honing their weapons. The water benders—including Katara and Hama, who refused to stay behind with the women and children—were making plans on how to best defend the fortress city.

The women and children had gathered together in the far reaches of the city in the hopes that they, at least, would be safe for the duration of the battle.

Aang, Harry, Yue and Katara were left to their own devices after the meeting, while the tribe scurried to and fro, making preparations and readying their hearts for the battle to come.

“What can we do, I wonder? Everyone is making all the preparations they can, but it still seems like it might not be enough.” Katara said quietly.

“I know one thing we can do.” Aang spoke up, turning to Harry. “We can go out to meet the fleet and try to do some damage before they even get here.”

“Aang! There are so many of them…I know you’re the avatar, but you’re just one person…and so are you!” she added to Harry, before turning imploring eyes back on Aang.

“It’s too dangerous.”

“No more dangerous than letting the fleet get all the way here untouched.” Aang argued.

“He’s right, you know. Yeah, we’re just two people, but we can fly away after doing some damage. Once the fleet gets here, there’s nowhere left to run. The ships are large, there are hundreds of soldiers on board, and so the amount of damage we’ll be able to do in a series of quick strikes will be negligible overall—but every ship we hit, every weapon we damage, is one that can’t be used here.”

“Then take me with you!”

“You have an important job to do here.” Harry reminded her, before turning to look at Yue who paled, but quickly composed herself.
“He’s right. We know they plan to slay the moon spirit. We cannot allow that to happen.” Aang agreed.

“You’ll have to be on watch for a sneak attack. A small force creeping up from an unexpected angle while everyone is focused on the battle out front will have a much better chance of slipping past to the spirit oasis than a large force will. I’ve put up a protective barrier to keep people who mean the moon harm from being able to find it, but it may not be enough. We don’t know how Zhao learned of the existence of the moon’s mortal form. He might have a spirit ally who will allow him to slip past, I just don’t know. Just in case the worst comes to pass, someone needs to be there to guard the spirits.”

“Let’s go tell the chiefs what we plan to do and get going.”

Harry nodded, and he and Aang rose to do their part for the war effort.

“Hold up…there they are.”

They had taken Appa to go meet the fleet, and at Harry’s suggestion had flown low amongst the icebergs so they could approach as closely as possible while remaining relatively unseen. “No sense dodging flaming boulders longer than absolutely necessary, after all.”

Even knowing what to expect, the reality still shook them to their bones. They were absolutely dwarfed and insignificant against the sheer size and might of a single warship—and there were so many that they seemed to fill the horizon from end to end.

Aang gulped, then straightened his shoulders.

“I guess we should get started.”

“Yeah.” Harry agreed, as he withdrew his broom and then flew to hover alongside them. He cast a surreptitious fireproofing charm on Appa and then faced Aang while keeping his face and manner as confident as he could make them.

“Just do as much as you can manage and then get out of there. Hit them fast and hard and do as much damage as you can. I’ll do the same. And Aang? Don’t take any foolish chances. Avatar or not, no one expects you to defeat a fleet this size single-handedly. Do what you can and then get out of there.”

“Be safe.” Aang whispered back.

“You too.” Harry patted Appa’s side and then steeled his nerves. “Let’s go.”

They were spotted almost immediately and a great cry went out, alerting the rest of the ships. Men began scrambling over the catapults and bringing them to bear. They were fast—they ended up dodging flaming fireballs on their approach. Part of Harry was tempted to just keep weaving around them, and forcing them to waste their ammunition, but he quelled the urge and kept focused. He could do more damage by sticking to his original plan.

Aang had already landed on the nearest ship. A blast of wind powered by his staff swept the deck free of soldiers, and then he went to work on the catapult, smashing it and rendering unable to function.

Harry dropped low and flew onward, dodging the fireblasts of the firebenders that were now
hurrying to line the decks. Two shadow clones appeared to either side of him, both on brooms like he was. Neither one would be able to keep casting spells indefinitely, but they could do some damage before they ran out of power. The three of them split up to each concentrate on a different section of the fleet.

He had found a spell last year in one of the books he’d taken from the room of requirement that let you quickly rust metal. At the time, he had wondered why he’d ever want or need such a thing, but he had learned it nonetheless. He could only be glad now that he had. He did a quick pass alongside the nearest ship, hitting the hull with the spell, as close to the waterline as he could manage. He wouldn’t be able to take out the fleet this way—the spell took some power each time it was cast—it would keep spreading until there was no more un-rusted metal left. He sped on, letting the spell do its work and moved to the next ship to do it again. Aang, meanwhile, was dodging and weaving more fireblasts up above and clearing another deck so he could take out more catapults.

Harry moved on to another group of ships, and alternated casting his rust spell, with making quick runs to smash a few catapults himself, and hit a few ships with exploding tags.

Aang and Appa were getting tired—so was he, truthfully. His clones had both done as much damage as they could and dissipated a few minutes ago due to lack of power. He dropped back to make another pass at the ships he’d earlier weakened by rust, and cast a few reductos at the areas most weakened just to speed things along.

He caught up with Aang, just as several more of the ships were bringing their catapults to bear. They dropped behind the cover of the nearest icebergs and sped away, while Harry let out a chakra pulse to trigger the exploding tags—the BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM as they sped away was music to his ears.

They chanced a look back when they were out of range. They’d done quite a bit, and were both trembling with exhaustion from pumping out so much power in such a short period of time, but they’d barely put a dent in the fleet.

He could see soldiers trying to flee the sinking ships—all of which were becoming more rust than steel. He felt a little sick, thinking about all the soldiers he might just have sentenced to a watery grave, but he reminded himself that it was necessary. Fire Nation had come here, intending to kill the tribe and slay the moon. They had to win here—the alternative was unthinkable.

“Third chakra is the fire chakra. It resides in your stomach. It runs on willpower and is blocked by shame. Look inward, and find those things which you are ashamed of, accept them and let them go.”

Zuko sunk deeper into his trance and just let his thoughts flow where they would.

What was he ashamed of?

He could remember being thirteen years old, when the bandages had come off of his burnt eye. He had peeled them away and steeled himself for what was underneath.

He had just stood there, numb and horrified at the violently red scar tissue that now made up half his face, and his mangled ear. The scar tissue was so thick he could barely open his eye, and his
eyebrow was completely gone. It had never grown back—probably never would.
It had been all he could do to face the sight of himself in the mirror. Not only was it ugly, it marked
what he was to the world—a failure.
It hadn’t helped that he’d started noticing girls around the same time.
The first time he had left the ship, after the bandages had come off, a girl his age had looked at him,
flinched and gasped.
He’d tried to avoid going onshore as much as he could after that, until finally, ashamed of his
cowardice, he had done so again at his uncle’s urging.
It had been difficult to face the stares, but he’d done so.
Enough time had passed now, the scar had, not faded, but grown more tolerable. It was still ugly and
he still drew stares, but he’d gotten used to it. In fact, he’d gotten so used to it, he couldn’t really
remember anymore what he looked like without it.

It was difficult, but he tried to let go of all of it.
The scar was there to stay, but it wasn’t a mark of shame.
It was the mark of a child betrayed by his father.
He exhaled and dove deeper.

Firebending.
It had been a source of joy the first time he had created fire. He’d thought it was the most beautiful
thing ever—so alive and a part of him.
It hadn’t stayed that way for long. Azula started her firebending lessons and had blossomed into an
awesome warrior practically overnight it seemed.
She was a prodigy, there was no doubt about it.
She had moved on to the advanced forms while he was still struggling with the basics.
Hell, he was still struggling.
Unbidden, a memory rose of himself and Azula when they were little: he had just started firebending
training, and she’d been eager and full of questions. He’d wanted to show off. He’d told her
everything he learned.
She had shown up to watch his lessons a month later and had done the first week’s lesson perfectly.
His bending master had spotted her, apparently playing around in the corner, oblivious to his
scrutiny.
She’d always been a good actress.
She’d been declared a prodigy, and had started getting lessons two years earlier than he himself did.
His father had started watching him with cold, indifferent eyes at that point, and Azula had become
the darling of the court.
That was when the self-doubt had crept in, and that’s when his progress had stalled.
His mother had been trying to make a lady of Azula—something she had wanted no part of. She’d
always been keen to be a warrior, and had wanted to be out battling and winning glory.
It was pretty ironic, now that he really thought about it.
Azula was only a (trained) firebender because of him.
Story of his life.
Different memories of his uncle chiding him to remember to focus on his breath, to stop worrying
about anything but what he was doing at the moment flittered past his mind’s eye, one after another.
There were a lot of them.
He’d never listened—he’d tried to, but he’d always been so worried that he wasn’t going fast
enough, doing well enough—would never be enough, period.
How was he supposed to find and capture the avatar if he couldn’t even beat his little sister?

“Child, you are all tangled up inside. Your energy cannot flow while this is so.”
The guru’s words, so irritating to hear just a few weeks ago were now a source of hope. Maybe if he
cleared all his chakras he could stop sabotaging himself, catch up to Azula, and maybe surpass her.
What else was he ashamed of?

_I’m completely inept at talking to people and making friends._
Azula had Mai and Ty Lee when they were growing up. There hadn’t been any boys his age for him to play with when he was a kid.
He’d been banished at thirteen, and badly scarred.
He really didn’t have the first clue how to interact with people his own age.
If he was completely honest, he didn’t have the first clue how to interact with anyone of any age.

“Nephew, you should come join the crew and I for music night. You can play the tsungi horn!”
“Nephew, come and join us for a nice game of pai sho!”
“Nephew, there is a festival on shore. You should go, have a little fun once in a while.”

“Look at that view! Spectacular!”
“Uncle, I don’t have time for looking at the stupid view! I need to find the avatar!”
“Nephew, it has only been a few days since you’ve been banished. You should take some time to rest…to heal!”

Just like that, he discovered a new source of shame. Uncle Iroh had followed him into exile—he hadn’t had to, that had been his choice. Since that day, he’d been trying in his own way to get him to relax, to have fun, to meet people his own age once in a while.
He hadn’t really appreciated it, and he hadn’t treated him very nicely over the years.
In fact, he’d spent a lot of time screaming at him, and telling him he was stupid, lazy and worthless.
_Just like dad did to me—though he usually didn’t scream, just sneer—the few times he actually bothered talking to me._
I’ve been doing my best to turn into my father…and I’ve been cultivating all his worst traits.

“Remember who you are…”
*I’m sorry, mom. It looks like I forgot along the way._

He couldn’t undo the past—no one could. The only thing he really could do was try to move forward, and be better in the future.
He couldn’t help the small shudder of horror when he imagined the endless nights of pai sho and tsungi horn playing that were likely ahead of him.

Maybe he could get out of it by trying to find some kids his own age…?

“Hello! Zuko here!”
“Weirdo.”

On second thought—endless nights of pai sho and tsungi horn weren’t sounding so bad…

“Oh, well done, young one. I knew you had it in you.”

The guru’s cheerful voice greeted him as he came out of his trance.

“Prince Zuko, how do you feel?”

Zuko’s stomach gave a loud growl that went on for several seconds.

“Um, hungry?”
There was fish and berries and juice for dinner that night—apparently a couple of fish had landed on
the shore during all the weirdness the night before. It made a nice change from the all fruit and
vegetable diet they’d been forced to subsist on since they’d been here.

He wandered aimlessly across the temple grounds, taking the scenic route back to his rooms, and
then stopped at a large pond. There was a series of them, one leading gently into the other.

The moon was mostly full overhead, and it illuminated the grounds well enough to see easily.

He had caught sight of his reflection.
Scarred face. Bald but for his topknot—a sign that he’d lost his honor but was working to reclaim it.

He’d shaved his head faithfully since they’d been there. It had become a rather ingrained habit over
the last three years.
He suddenly wondered why he bothered.

Quick on the heels of that thought, he wondered whether he actually had lost his honor, as he’d
believed so strongly these last few years.
Could your honor really be taken away by another?
The right and proper answer was of course he had—the Fire Lord said so.

The Fire Lord was the ruler of the Fire Nation—did that also make him sovereign over his people’s
hearts, minds and souls?
Could he take away someone’s honor?

Do I even want to reclaim honor by his definition?

His father’s definition of honor was to plot against his brother and father, sacrifice his wife, celebrate
the death of his nephew, throw away his son, and twist his daughter—all in the name of his own
ambitions.
His father’s definition of honor was to carelessly throw away the lives of his own people in the name
of his own self-aggrandizement.
His father’s definition of honor was standing orders to burn down the villages of civilians—women,
children and old men, and slaughter them in the streets.
His father’s definition of honor was to reward those who were as bloodthirsty as he was.

He fell to his knees, trembling as his traitorous thoughts caught up to him.

Are they traitorous if they’re true?
He felt like he was teetering on the edge of a precipice—one side was the safe, known world, on
the other, a freefall into the vast unknown.
“My nephew has more honor in his little finger than you have in your entire body, Zhao.”

Zuko’s trembling stopped as his uncle’s words came back to him. He’d said that right after he’d
beaten Zhao in an Agni Kai, and the treacherous rat had tried to shoot him in the back.
If I still have my honor, this charade is meaningless and insulting. I’m living a lie.
He felt at his waist and withdrew the knife his uncle had sent him years ago, during the siege of Ba
Sing Se—before everything had gone so wrong. The blade caught the moonlight, allowing him to
read the inscription Never give up without a fight.
He took in a deep breath, held it, and then exhaled, letting his fears and doubts leave with it.
He reached up, seized his topknot and cut it free.

As he watched it drift away, down from the pond he currently knelt at to the next and the next—
where it would eventually drift out to sea—all he could think was that he felt lightheaded…and free,
as though a terrible burden had just been lifted from his shoulders.

A few quick scrapes removed the remainder of the fuzz from his scalp, leaving him completely bald. All he needed was a big, stupid arrow on his head and he could be the avatar.

He shuddered at the mental image and banished it to the depths of his mind.

Of course, the avatar had hair now, didn’t he?

Great, he now looked more like the avatar than the avatar did; which could be a problem, now that he thought about it. He really hoped his hair grew back quickly.

He shook off his musings and stood, taking one last look at his now-bald visage and steeled himself for the questions and recriminations that were sure to come.

He would face them head on, without shame or doubt.

From here on out, he would make his own honor.

Harry was certain the siege on the North Pole was something that would revisit his dreams and nightmares for years to come.

There were just so many of them—so many weapons, so many ships, *so much fire*.

In spite of their best efforts, the Fire Nation was slowly encroaching on them.

He and Aang had made a few more forays out to the ships to force them to split their attentions between the danger in front and the danger behind, but they were just two people, and even giving it their all, they weren’t making enough of a difference quickly enough to completely turn the tide. That wasn’t to say they were making it easy for them.

Bodies of dead Fire Nation soldiers littered the ice everywhere you looked.

Their philosophy seemed to be *we don’t care how many of our own are slaughtered in the process, we’ll just keep coming till we get you*.

It didn’t help that they were at their strongest when the sun was high up in the sky, and the waterbenders were strongest when the moon was.

Hama was an unexpected bonus. She’d been living on a dry volcano for years, far from the source of her power, but she’d learned to make do. She’d even discovered a new, frightening use for her bending powers—blood bending.

Just on her own she was terrifying and demoralizing the soldiers that tried to breach the fortress, sending them dancing like puppets and turning them on one another, spinning them to face their ships when they tried blasting out with their fire.

As the sun began to set and the moon to rise, they didn’t have to be told to retreat, they just did it.

It was something that would work in their favor, really, the long wait until sunrise. Between he and Aang attacking their ships, Hama making puppets of them, and the rest of the warriors and waterbenders going after them with wild eyed screaming defiance, he figured the troops were going to be shivering in their bunks and having nightmares while trying to rest up for another try at the city.
He waited till the fleet retreated out of easy reach and then turned to Aang.

“Come on. We’re going to give their dead a funeral.”

“You’re going to what?” Hama hissed.

He held up a hand, urging her to wait, and turned back to Aang.

"Start gathering the dead down below into a group. I’ll get the ones up here. Get some oil or something too, something that will help things burn.”

Aang looked confused, but he trotted off, willing enough to help. He even got some people to help him, though they looked rather dubious about the whole thing.

“What do you mean you’re going to give that filth a funeral?” Hama demanded again once Aang was out of earshot.

“I think we’d all like to hear the answer to that.” Hakoda added, his voice neutral.

“They’re terrified and demoralized right now. I think we should help it along. I’m going to stack their dead on rafts, set them on fire and send them to the ships. Let’s see how much rest they get with the stink of their comrades’ burning corpses filling their nostrils all night. They like to burn things so much? Let them choke on it.”

Fierce, wolfish grins sprouted on all those listening. They were angry and their blood demanded vengeance.

“You heard him, men! Gather the dead down below so we can give the fallen a proper funeral!” Chief Arnook shouted.

A cheer went up and the men began moving around to gather up the fallen Fire Nation soldiers, strip them of their armor and chuck them down to sea level where they could be easily set loose.

They even started building simple rafts. Harry was just going to transfigure things into rafts, but maybe it was better this way. They were already freaked out about his tent and his ability to travel long distances. There was no need to freak them out further.

He left them to it, and went to talk to Aang, who was staring out over the dead with wounded eyes. Poor kid—only twelve, raised to be a pacifist monk, and stuck in the middle of a war.

This was going to change him; it was inevitable, really. You couldn’t live through something like this and not be a little scarred by it, but he hated it.

Aang was such a happy-go-lucky kid. He wanted to go sledding on penguins, and ride the Omashu mail chute like a roller coaster, and play harmless pranks—he didn’t want to be fighting a war or killing people.

Life didn’t always give you a choice about these things. The only thing he could really do was try to ease the burden, and make it scar as little as possible.

“Aang?”
“There’s so many of them, and they’re all dead. We shouldn’t all be killing each other.”

“We were defending our lives and the lives of one another from people who came here to kill us all. Reverence for life is all very well and good—so long as you remember that your own life also has value, as do the lives of your loved ones. They made a choice when they came here. You saw them marching on the city—their comrades were falling left and right, and they kept coming, and kept trying to kill us all. Yeah, we could have knocked them out, but what then? They would have just woken up and kept trying to kill us. There’s a lot more of them than there are of us, and we didn’t go to their home to try to destroy it and kill everyone there—they came here.”

Aang sighed and hung his head.

“The temples are right, you know. It is a terrible thing to take another’s life. You remove all their possibilities—good or ill. As thinking beings, we really should try to live our lives in a way that minimizes harm to the world and people around us wherever possible. The thing is, sometimes you’re not given a choice that will allow you to simply walk away. We did that at the South Pole…they followed us. They’ll continue to follow us no matter where we go…and there aren’t many places left in the world that we could go.”

Aang still didn’t look happy or convinced, so Harry tried another tack.

“We found your monk Gyatso surrounded by dead Fire Nation soldiers, the same with the other elders of your temple. We didn’t find the bodies of any children there. They all killed, and stayed behind to allow the children a chance to escape. Were they evil men?”

“NO! Gyatso was…he was the kindest, gentlest person I’ve ever known!”

“Exactly.” Harry agreed. “And after living a lifetime dedicated to peace and nonviolence, I’m sure it killed something in them to go against that…but they did, to spare the innocent and defend their lives.”

Aang’s eyes grew watery, and his face crumpled just a bit. Harry sighed, and hugged him.

“It hurts.”

“Sometimes that’s a good thing. So long as you mourn the senseless loss of life, no matter which side it’s on, it means you haven’t hardened your heart. It’s when you can slaughter your fellow men without care or remorse that you have to worry.”

He stepped back and held Aang at arm’s length and looked him in the eye.

“Fire Nation’s war against the rest of the world is like an infection, really. As they spread, they destroy everything in their path. They have to be stopped, and driven back before the world can heal.”

“It still hurts.”

“I know. I would spare you it if I could. I can’t though. This is your task…and you’re the right person for it.”

“How do you know? I don’t feel like the right person. I never wanted to be the avatar.”

“That’s why you’re the right person. Someone who covets the power the avatar has is the wrong person—they would only care about the power they had, not how best to use it—kind of like the Fire Lord, really. So long as you don’t let hatred and bitterness fill your heart, and you can continue to be
more concerned with healing the world than destroying it, you’re the right person. I believe in you, Aang. Now, you just need to learn to believe in yourself.”

Aang smiled—a shaky smile, but a smile nonetheless and wiped at his eyes.

“It looks like they’ve got the rafts finished.”

Harry cast a surreptitious fire-proofing charm on the rafts before the bodies started getting stacked on top and doused with oil. Letting the rafts burn and fall into the ocean would remove the full impact of their present, after all.

Aang said an air nomad prayer for the dead, while the rest of them pushed the rafts onto the water. Harry tapped each of them in turn, and they began to move under their own power towards the gates, which were already being opened to let them through.

He drew his wand to light them on fire—he didn’t want them all freaking out that he was a firebender, like Aang, Katara and Sokka had when he first met them.

The whole group retreated once the rafts were alight—the stench of burning flesh and burning fish oil was a sickening combination, and none of them wanted to inhale the thick, oily smoke that was already rising from them.

The rafts would sail out to the middle of the fleet and then stop, and then would continue burning until the bodies were reduced to ash and bone.

He really hoped they appreciated all their hard work.
Attack of the giant glowing fish monster

Chapter Summary

The siege of the north pole continues, Zuko has a family reunion.

“I never thought I’d say this…but I really miss Prince Zuko.”

It was a measure of how demoralized they all were that Lieutenant Jee’s words were met with fervent nods and wistful sighing, rather than the disbelieving snorts that would have met such an utterance a few months prior.

“General Iroh too.”

This time smiles were added to the fervent nods. It had only been two weeks at most since they’d been commandeered, and ordered to leave the Prince and the General stranded at the Eastern Air Temple. It seemed like a lifetime.

They’d watched two air nomads—or one air nomad and one spirit; they still weren’t too clear on that—wreak unholy havoc on the fleet just by themselves. Then…ships started disintegrating and simply fell apart and crumbled into the sea. They’d saved who they could, but it was too few for anyone’s liking. They heard whispered reports of sorcery by an ice witch who turned men against their own with a flick of her fingers. Now…they were huddled below decks, trying not to smell the burning flesh of their own fallen soldiers, or inhale the thick black smoke that was currently hanging like a wet blanket over the whole fleet. They’d seen the soldiers on the ships closest trying to hose down the rafts and the burning bodies, but to no avail—they just kept burning no matter what they did. Trying to knock the bodies into the water didn’t help either—they kept burning and floated among the ships, spreading the stink and smoke further.

“We’re all going to die here, aren’t we?”

Lieutenant Jee wasn’t sure which of the men had spoken, but it was obvious from the looks on their faces that it was a sentiment shared by everyone.

“Any sane man would have turned the fleet around and given it up as a bad job…”

“But no one ever accused Zhao of sanity.”

“Have any of the rest of you noticed there seems to be more than the usual number of insane commanders running around these days?”

“Scum floats to the top.”

The men all sniggered, but it was a hollow sound.

“We could mutiny.”
Everyone froze, and a leaden silence hung over the galley.

“Chang! What are you saying? That’s treason!”

Chang sat, serene and implacable underneath the horrified stares of his fellows.

“I’m an old man. I’ve seen and done a lot in my life, some of which I’m not proud of—but I’ve made my peace with such things. All of us” he indicated himself and the rest of the crew “are old soldiers. I’ve been with the navy since I was but a small lad. I was actually retired, you know, had been for a few years, when General Iroh asked me to come along with him and the young prince as a personal favor. I had grown restless, living full time on the land after a lifetime at sea, and so I agreed.”

He sighed and set a stern eye on the rest of the men in the room.

“I’m old, like I said. If I meet my end here, it’s no great loss, really. You young fellows have your whole lives ahead of you. How many of our young men are going to be lost forever in these icy wastes? And for what? Because Zhao decided to commandeer the whole blamed navy to soothe his battered ego, that’s why! You mark my words…the spirits are angered and have risen against us. No good will come of us staying here.”

“I don’t want to hear any more talk of mutiny.” Lieutenant Jee growled. “The only thing that would accomplish is to further shatter and demoralize our forces, while leaving us vulnerable to the savages.”

“Not so savage…however callously done they gave our fallen a proper funeral, and the fires will guide the souls of those fallen to the sea to their proper home, and not leave them wandering lost in these icy wastes for all time.” Chang interjected.

“That being said” Jee continued as though he’d not been interrupted “I see no point in sticking around should it become obvious that all is lost. For now, we hold steady, we do what we can to keep all our people from dying. Should worse come to worst, we flee, and hope there are others with enough sense to follow us.”

“And if angry spirits come calling, kowtow like your lives depend upon it.” Chang added.

Jee glowered at him a moment and then relented.

“Probably not bad advice.” He agreed.

The fourth chakra is the air chakra. It resides in your heart. It runs on love and is blocked by grief. Look within, and consider the things that grieve you.”

Grief. What were the things that grieved him?

Mom.
That one was easy. She had been the cornerstone of his life, the person he’d loved more than any other. Her loss had wounded him beyond imagining. Eight years later, it still hurt.
She had made the decisions that led there to protect him…and he didn’t know that she was dead. He did his best to let go of the grief that had haunted him for the last eight years in the face of that hope.

What else?
Lu Ten, his cousin. He hadn’t known him for long—he’d been a lot older than he and Azula and he’d died when they were still quite young. He’d been a good guy, the best—never too busy to pay attention to his little cousin, willing to play with him. Then, he’d gone off to war and died there. His death triggered the implosion that shook the rest of his family. His death still haunted uncle to this day.

Azula, his sister. Underneath the bitterness and the jealousy and the anger and the hurt…he loved her. She was his baby sister, they had grown up together, she had been his only companion more often than not after mom was gone. Deadly, dangerous, brilliant Azula—prodigy, princess, daddy’s perfect little girl. She was loyal to their father, and only to their father. Should he say the word, she’d do her utmost to end him without batting an eyelash. He wished they could have been friends, that he could trust her, that they could have been able to count on one another even if the rest of the world went to hell… But he couldn’t, and he never could, no matter how many times he’d hoped maybe this time will be different. He supposed it was time he simply accepted that, however much it hurt, or how big an empty space it left in his heart.

His father.

No, not his father…the man who helped his mother conceive him.

Even when he was little, before everything else went so wrong, he was never around, was never there for them—not at the palace, not even when they were on vacation. After he became Fire Lord he was even less interested in being with them. It never matter how he’d twisted himself into knots trying to please him. Uncle Iroh had been more of a father to him than his father had.

It was this thought that let him let go. His father might not love him—bonds of blood be damned…but uncle Iroh did, always had—he’d just been too stubborn and blind to see it…hadn’t wanted to see it, because it made it hurt more. Why could his uncle love him, when his own father didn’t? Maybe his father just wasn’t capable of it…and…if he wasn’t capable of it…that meant it wasn’t his fault, didn’t it? He hadn’t done anything wrong. His mother loved him, his uncle loved him… He wasn’t unlovable…his father just wasn’t able to love.

“Well done, young one.” Guru Pathik said quietly.

Zuko opened his eyes and discovered he was crying. He wiped the moisture from his cheeks and let out a shaky breath.

“It hurts, I know…but much as a broken bone sometimes has to be re-broken in order to heal correctly, or an infected wound has to be lanced and probed to let out the infection…sometimes there needs to be pain in order for true healing to take place.”

“I understand.”

“Go, take a small break, get yourself together. Then we’ll continue.”
Harry sat up with a gasp of alarm that woke the others.

“The Spirit Oasis! We have to hurry!”

“Oh no!”

“How did they get in without anyone seeing them?”

“They must have snuck in, probably just a few people, damn it!”

They ran from their room with all speed.

“Sound the alarm! The spirit oasis is under attack!”

“I’ll go ahead, get there quickly!”

Harry disappeared with a crack, and reappeared in the oasis, beside the pond at the center of the Northern Water Tribe’s city, which was the resting place for the mortal forms of the moon and ocean spirits.

There was only one fish in the pond, and a man he guessed was Admiral Zhao was holding aloft a dripping bag and speechifying.

“They will call me Zhao the Unstoppable! Zhao the Moonslayer!”

“Monkey faced idiot with a really big mouth, more like.” Harry growled as he cut the bag free from his hand. He caught the fish before it came to any harm and guided it back to the pond, while trying to dodge Zhao’s fireblasts.

He waved his arm in a half circle in front of him and let out a blast of wind that knocked him backwards into the walls.

Then the waters rose up and froze him there.

“Aang…Katara…good timing.”

“Is the moon alright?”

“Yeah. The moon’s alright.” Harry sighed with relief.

They all heard sizzling at the same time and turned to see Zhao was coming free of his ice prison. His face was twisted with madness and hate…and a blast of fire was already leaving his fingers.

“NO!”

It was like it all happened in slow motion…Princess Yue jumped in the way and took the blast herself. She tumbled backwards, her eyes wide and pained and collapsed by the side of the pond, with one arm dangling into the water. Her last breath shuddered out of her and she lay there with sightless eyes.

“AAAAARRRRGGGH!”

Hama was suddenly there, furious and crazed and unstoppable as a tidal wave. A great spear of ice slammed through Zhao’s chest, armor and all, and sent a great gout of blood splashing in every direction.
The tableau froze for a moment, and then all of them turned to look at the fallen princess.

“Princess Yue!” Hama wept.

Sokka stumbled to Yue’s body on numb legs, and collapsed beside her to gather up her body, and stare down at her with wounded, hopeless eyes. The rest of them gathered around them and stood in silent respect.

Suddenly a bright light coalesced over the pond, and formed into a ghostly version of Yue. She was the same, but different. Her furs had been replaced with a floaty summer gown and trailing scarves, which made her look oddly like a heavenly maiden from a Japanese anime. Harry found himself having to quell the urge to giggle hysterically.

“Do not weep for me, friends…it has always been my destiny. The moon gave me part of her life so that she could experience the life of a human, and better understand her children…and in time, gain a human form so that she could speak to them.” She gazed down at Hama sadly.

“You make a beautiful moon, Yue” Harry said, his voice thick.

He’d only known the girl a short time, but her sudden death burned even so. She’d been gracious and kind—a real lady. “but we still have a problem, I hate to say.”

“Yeah…Yue just became the moon!” Sokka snarled.

“Besides that.” Harry sighed. “Aang’s vision showed the moon turning red and then vanishing. The moon turned red when Zhao took the white fish out of the pond…it has to vanish now.”

“WHAT!”

“Hear me out.” Harry held up a quelling hand. “I know how it sounds, but you don’t understand. Unless the vision is fulfilled, the moon is still in danger. The thing is, I think I know how we can fulfill the vision.”

“Keep talking.”

“I make the moon fish invisible.” Harry knelt down and suited actions to words. He slipped his wand into the water and tapped the white fish on the head as it swam past. As the disillusionment charm took hold, they could hear a great panicked cry go up outside—and Yue vanished.

“Sounds like it worked.”


“Avatar…” Yue’s voice echoed around the chamber. “My husband has an idea…”

Aang’s eyes turned white and started to glow, as did his arrow tattoos.

“Yes…this is not over until we finish things.”

Harry shivered slightly at the weird echo effect Aang’s voice suddenly seemed to have, as though many people were speaking through him at once. Just as bad was the sense of hovering power that filled the small enclosure near to bursting. He stepped into the pond and put his fists together, then sunk down into the water, which began to glow, and then the glow traveled up the waterfall to the outside.
Sokka spared barely a glance to Aang’s disappearance, he was too wrapped up in his grief at Yue’s sudden death.

Harry, Katara, and Hama all traded a glance, and ran outside to see what was happening.

Outside, towering above the city was…

“A giant, glowing fish-monster…”

“The great spirit of the ocean” Hama corrected, falling to her knees, and pressing her forehead to the ice below.

The fish monster roared in fury, so the rest of them quickly followed suit. They could feel the ocean’s stare as it passed. Once the heavy weight of its stare was removed, Harry risked a peek at it. Aang was in the center, still glowing, riding in a bubble in the center of the fish. It had to be at least a hundred feet tall, standing upright as though its fins had become legs and was made entirely of water, though water that glowed from within.

Fire Nation had crept up on them while the moon was red, in preparation for the benders to all lose their powers, it seemed. Koizilla—as Harry privately thought of him—floated through the city, ridding it of invaders with swipes of his hands…fins…whatever—and then continued on towards the front of the city…and the ocean.

Harry unrolled his carpet, which the others quickly climbed onto, and rose into the air above the oasis so they could see what was happening.

Koizilla was pushing back the whole fleet with swipes of its fins, roaring in outrage all the while. The giant ships were tumbling end over end like toys…no…not the whole fleet…there were two…no, three ships…that remained relatively untouched by the raging ocean.

The soldiers on board had all hit the deck and kow-towed like the water tribe had. For showing their respect, it seemed the ocean was willing to let them live, while those who gazed up defiantly and brandished their weapons died…all of them.

Hama’s face was alight with a fierce and savage joy. He couldn’t blame her, after hearing her story about the raids on the south and her imprisonment, but it was rather disturbing to see nonetheless.

Harry dropped them back to the ground, and hurried inside the oasis to remove the disillusionment and bring back the moon.

“Should have mutinied…should have mutinied.”

Jee shivered and tried to coax a bit more speed out of their ship, even though they were already going full-throttle. His little ship was packed full of his own crew and contingent of soldiers, and the few souls they’d managed to save in the aftermath—but it was few, far too few.

Chang was right—they should have mutinied. The spirits were against them, and thousands were
dead because of it.

The moon had disappeared, and the ocean rose up to wreak vengeance on them all.

They’d been passing wreaked ships and floating bodies for hours now and there was no end in sight.

No one was going to have report that there was a massive naval disaster—reports were probably already reaching the capitol as they spoke. The ocean had pushed the bodies and wrecked ships all the way to the edges of water tribe territory. It really, really didn’t want any of them up there.

That was fine with him. If he never saw ice or snow again in his lifetime it would be too soon.

“Sir…the other ships are hailing us.”

“Of course they are, they’ve just realized we’re veering off to go somewhere other than back to Fire Nation to check in.” Jee sighed and slowed to a halt while the other two ships changed course to intercept them.

Jee marched up to the observation post on top of the tower so he could more easily speak to them. His ship was tiny in comparison to the two destroyers—a blockade runner, and a broken down old wreck of one at that—same as their last ship.

“Just where do you think you’re going? Did your brains get scrambled by the giant fish monster? Fire Nation is that way!”

“My brains are just fine. My command post is that way. We’re not returning to Fire Nation.”

“What do you mean you’re not returning? The Fire Lord needs to be informed about what happened.”

“I’m sure the both of you can do that just fine. We’re not part of the navy. We were commandeered by Zhao when he passed by us. We’re Prince Zuko’s ship, and because of Zhao we left both he and General Iroh stranded at the Eastern Air Temple. The crew and soldiers on this ship are all retired men who took this post as a personal favor to General Iroh after he himself retired. I’m afraid you two are all that’s left of the naval fleet.”

He shouted for the helmsman to get them back underway while the two ships, and their crew, and those they’d managed to save, just watched them mutely. They allowed them to leave, which was good—he didn’t fancy trying to fight them—they’d lose, for one…and too many of their people had died already.

He hadn’t been completely honest—the survivors they’d pulled from the water were all active marines and army soldiers—but he was angry—more angry than he could ever remember being. If things kept up the way they were going, all of Fire Nation was going to end up getting wiped off the face of the earth. People the world over hated their guts…and feared them. The spirits of the world were rising up against them and wiping them out by the thousands…and the avatar had returned—and been harried by them pretty much from the moment he’d reappeared. Worse than that—he was an airbender, and Fire Nation had completely wiped out his people….who apparently were all pacifist monks and nuns, and not the army of warriors hell-bent on destroying them all that history painted them as.

Chang had been right—they all should have mutinied.
Maybe they still should.
He closed his eyes and took a deep breath and tried to banish the image of thousands of their soldiers, half-frozen and floating away from the north pole. He was angry, and didn’t know what he was even thinking. He was a loyal citizen of Fire Nation. Zhao had been a self-aggrandizing bastard, but surely he couldn’t have foreseen giant glowing fish monsters and disappearing moons. No one could have.

They’d all been expecting an ordinary campaign, but it had been anything but. No one could have expected such a thing to happen.

He’d be happy to just get back to hunting the avatar, really. Nothing nearly as weird happened when they’d just been doing that.

Well…that little girl had been kidnapped off the deck, but that was pretty minor in comparison.

That was when Jee had a sudden, unsettling thought.

The avatar was the bridge to the spirit world. If Zuko succeeded and drug the kid back to Fire Nation to be locked away in a deep, dark dungeon for all time, there wasn’t going to be anyone in the world who could talk to giant, glowing fish-monsters and get them to stop.

Greatest enemy of the Fire Nation or not…it might actually be in their best interests to make friends with the avatar and beg him to intercede on their behalf.

Lieutenant Jee let out a bitter chuckle at that thought—the Prince would never go for it. He was so convinced he could only reclaim his honor by capturing the avatar, he’d probably blow him away for even suggesting they just leave the kid alone and play nice.

No, once the prince was done his spiritual training, they’d be back harrying the kid across the face of the world.

It was obvious to him now. They were all doomed.

Cleaning up the aftermath of the battle and fixing the city was accomplished rather quickly, all things considered. Since everything was made of ice, the tribe’s waterbenders just had to command the waters to restore the damaged architecture.

Tending the wounded and having funerals for the fallen took a little longer.

Harry helped out with some of the cleanup, and then headed off to the Northern Air Temple to retrieve the remainder of the Southern Water Tribe.

Aang and Sokka went with him, both to keep Toph company when the others left, and for Aang to resume his earthbender training.

Though it would have been quicker for Harry to just pop off, they took Appa, who refused to be left behind if Aang was leaving.

“You’ll open up the library again, won’t you? I was hoping we could find something about the 36th level of airbending.

“Why? I’m already a master airbender.”
“You’re also the last of the original airbenders, and you gained your mastery by creating a new move, not completing the last tier, right? If you do in fact hope to pass down your legacy, it would be a shame if what carried down was an incomplete mastery of the airbender’s art. Besides, aren’t you curious? If the 35th level is separating out gases from air, the 36th level has to be really wacky, don’t you think?”

“I guess it couldn’t hurt to look. Hey! There it is! The Northern Air temple!”

The Northern Air Temple was a grouping of tall, straight towers with green-tiled roofs nestled on a mountaintop above the cloud line in the mountain range that spanned the northeastern Earth Kingdom. There were several open courtyards, terraces and balconies from which to launch gliders, or land sky bison all around it.

Aang steered Appa in towards the nearest open courtyard and landed, just as an explosion sounded within the temple and a cloud of rock dust came billowing out of the nearest doorway.

The three of them launched themselves out of Appa’s saddle and took off running before the echoes of the explosion died away.

They skidded to a halt and gaped at what they found.

Toph and the women and children of the Southern Water Tribe were standing around watching while a bunch of strangers dressed in Earth Kingdom clothing demolished the temple. From the look of it, they’d all come running when they heard the noise as well. The explosion they’d heard was a wall that once held a beautiful (if faded) mural of air nomads flying on gliders while lemurs and sky bison frolicked among them, being blown to smithereens. Other folks, at the same time, were knocking out the faces of past air nomad elders so they could run pipes through them.

Aang staggered as though he’d just received a mortal blow and looked positively stricken. Sokka gaped.

Harry unleashed a wind blast that sent the interlopers flying down the hall to crash into the large metal doors at the far end.

“WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU PEOPLE, AND WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING! THIS IS A TEMPLE! HOW DARE YOU!”

The interlopers scrambled backwards in the face of his fury and huddled together at the far end of the hall. Harry kicked the pile of pipes the folks had stacked up and sent them skittering and clattering through the hallway.

“WELL? ANSWER ME. WHO. ARE.YOU!”

“They’re refugees from Earth Kingdom. They said their leader, who calls himself the Mechanist, just stumbled across this place while searching for somewhere safe for all of them to live. There’s plenty of room here, so we let them stay.” Toph answered.

“Which of you is the mechanist?”

A tall, skinny, gangly fellow with a monacle-- bald but for spiky whips of hair that stood up on the back of his head-- whimpered and trembled at Harry’s approach.
“The mechanist, huh? And you came equipped for renovations…complete with metal pipes. I find that odd, really. How did you find this place?”

“I t-told you young man…I was wandering along, looking for a safe haven for all of us…”

Toph turned her sightless eyes towards the two of them.

“He’s lying.”

“The lady says you’re lying. Try again.”

“Sh-she’s mistaken. We mean no one any harm.”

“Lying…telling the truth.”

“You were sent here by Fire Nation, weren’t you?”

“N-no!”

“Lying.”

“You were sent here by Fire Nation…and they call you the Mechanist. You’re their weapons designer, aren’t you?”

Harry heard a noise behind him and turned to see a boy in a wheelchair approaching.

“Dad! Tell him it’s not true…tell him!”

The Mechanist closed his eyes and looked away from his son’s trusting face, before slumping brokenly to the floor.

“I wish that I could…but I’m afraid it’s true. It’s all true.”

“Dad! Why? Why?”

“I had no choice. I did it to protect you…to protect us all.”

“The sixth chakra is the light chakra. It resides in the forehead.”

“What about the fifth one? It’s in the throat, right?”

“You have already cleared that one. The sound chakra in the throat runs on truth and is blocked by the lies we tell ourselves. You had to clear the throat chakra before you could even begin to start untangling your energies—it was that chakra, the lies you told yourself, that kept you from even being able to start getting to the roots of the others. Now, moving on…the light chakra runs on insight and is blocked by illusion. Separation is the greatest illusion of all. Think on this, young one.”

Separation is an illusion. How?

What was separation…different people, different nations, different elements…they were all separate.
The last time he’d seen the avatar’s group, they were all disguised as Earth Kingdom, but that didn’t make it so, it was just a disguise. Water couldn’t become fire, nor could earth become air. How could that separateness be an illusion?

He didn’t get it. He tried to concentrate, and understand what the guru was trying to tell him, but his thoughts just went in circles. He was Zuko—we wasn’t Lieutenant Jee or Uncle Iroh. He was a firebender—not a waterbender or an earthbender. He was Fire Nation—hanging out at an air nomad temple, meditating while bald and wearing orange pants he’d borrowed from the guru while waiting for his clothes to dry didn’t change that.

An hour later, he slowly came out of his trance as he heard shouting. He opened his eyes and found the men from his ship making their way across the grounds towards them. There were soldiers with them—a lot of soldiers, in fact. He started to get nervous, and wondered if his father had just decided to off him once and for all, but then he noticed the soldiers seemed to be in bad shape, and many of them were ill.

He climbed to his feet and wandered down to the shore to where his uncle and the others who had been trapped there with them were waiting.

“Lieutenant Jee, we’re glad to see you again. Who are your new friends?

“Survivors we managed to fish out of the arctic waters before they died, poor bastards. The fleet’s gone, general. Two ships, other than ourselves, survived the north pole—but they both lost about half their crews even so. A hundred and fifty war ships, sir, with all the men on them, except for what you see here, and the few that are left on the two remaining ships. We’re the only survivors.”

The guru was walking among them, examining the men and shaking his head. He took control of the group, sending some off to gather food, some to set up a makeshift infirmary, others to lead the unhurt soldiers to rooms, then he took a few with himself to help gather herbs so he could make medicines for them.

Zuko went with the group herding wounded men into the temple to see if there was anything he could do to help. Many of the men felt wrong…like their harmony was off somehow. He didn’t understand it, or what it meant.

He was helping a guy who was having trouble walking. His legs felt like big spots of wrongness—it was the only way he could really explain it. After he’d helped the man lay down, he decided to take a look at his legs. His legs were blackened and blistered.

“What happened to you?”

“I was in the water at the north pole. My ship…we just got tumbled end over end like a kid’s toy. I was swept right off the deck. I managed to find something to hold onto, but it wasn’t big enough for me to climb on…my legs were in the water. I’m going to lose them, aren’t I?”

“I’m not a healer.” Zuko replied, uncomfortable.

The guy fell asleep right after. He looked exhausted…and haunted.

The sense of wrongness was really starting to bug him. The energies weren’t flowing right. He was
too cold in some places and too hot in others. If he could just spread out the heat so it was where it was needed…

He wasn’t really thinking about what he was doing, he just reached out and nudged a bit at the guy’s energy. It seemed to help.

Still uncertain of what he was doing, or why, he nudged again and then again and again and again. The sense of wrongness faded with every nudge.

The guy’s face slackened in relief and he relaxed into a deeper sleep.

Mystified by the whole strange encounter, he rose and headed out to see the others.

There was more wrongness—all the men that were now laying in fitful sleep all over the temple. They all had it. Some in their legs, some their arms, some their whole bodies. He found his steps leading him to each of the men in turn. He started with the ones that felt most wrong and nudged here and there until they stopped itching at his senses, then moved on to the rest.

Zuko blinked and tried to clear his fuzzy vision. Why was he so tired all of a sudden?

He tried to move on to the next man, but strong hands restrained him and then led him away.

“No…they’re still wrong.”

“Enough, Prince Zuko. The rest of the men will recover without your assistance…you, however, are going to do yourself a serious injury if you do not come with me now.”

He blinked again, and stumbled alongside his uncle and Lieutenant Jee, who were each supporting half of him so he could walk. He was so tired, and he couldn’t think clearly.

The next thing he knew, he was being pressed backwards into his bunk in the room he’d taken for himself, and a bowl of something was being pressed to his lips. He drank it down, and then felt himself being forced to lie down. He was out like a light within moments.

Iroh stroked his nephew’s forehead, and smiled at him with pride and tenderness.

“Sir…since when is the prince a healer?”

“Since today, I’m thinking. He’s never shown any such aptitude before that I am aware of. It seems our spiritual training is bearing unexpected fruit.”

“Maybe we’re not as doomed as I thought.”

“Jee?”

“The north pole…the whole campaign was like being trapped in a never ending nightmare. A hundred-foot-tall glowing fish monster is what wiped out our fleet—whether it was the moon or the ocean I’m not sure—the moon disappeared and the waters rose up and then we were being swept away. Even before that…one of the waterbenders can make puppets of men with her bending…and the airbenders! Don’t even get me started on them. The two of them took out a good third of the fleet just by themselves. Weird things kept happening too…a bunch of the ships just rusted away in an hour into dust and crumbled away! We couldn’t fight it, there was nothing anyone could do. How do you stop a several ton warship from rusting in moments? How do you fight a witch who can turn
your own body against you? How do you fight the ocean when it decides to take form? The only reason we survived is because we fell on our knees and pressed our foreheads to the deck when the thing appeared! The survivors on the other ships did the same. Anyone who didn’t die…except for the few we managed to pull out and bring with us. I had been half afraid most of them were going to die as well, but I couldn’t just leave them there…but they’re going to pull through, aren’t they?”

“Guru Pathik seems to think most of them will, yes. Between what my nephew has done and the medicines the guru has prepared, yes, I think they will.”

“Maybe there are some spirits that are still kindly disposed towards us. This is a gift of the spirits, of that I’ve no doubt. I think we’ll all sleep a little easier because of it.”

When Harry landed his carpet on the ice, Arnoook and Hakoda traded a grim glance and came forward to speak to him as the women and children were exiting the tent.

“Has something happened?” Hakoda asked quietly. Harry wondered what his face looked like that they both were looking so serious.

“Yeah, something happened alright. When we arrived at the Northern Air Temple we found a group of Earth Kingdom refugees had shown up after I dropped everyone off there. They told everyone they were fleeing the war and the Fire Nation, and had nowhere else to go, so naturally they made room for them. When we all arrived there, we found them demolishing the temple.”

“Why?”

“Renovations, to make it more to their liking. Aang looked like someone had just punched him in the gut….they were knocking down walls, smashing statues, and putting holes through the faces of past air nomads to run pipes through. I saw that look on his face… and I might have gotten a little testy…”

Hakoda and Arnoook traded a speaking glance, but said nothing. They had seen him in action against the ships, and they had seen how protective he was of the avatar. Testy. They could just imagine.

Harry shook his head and banished the scene from his mind. He really hadn’t meant to go all wrath of god on everyone…but seeing that look on Aang’s face, knowing how much the temples’ continued existence meant to him—both for their connection to his past, and his hopes for the future. Alright, so he didn’t really regret it, even if all the people seemed to be terrified of him now.

You know what? He didn’t even care. They were a bunch of smug, ignorant assholes, and he could care less if he hurt their delicate feelings. The air temples were beautiful places, filled with history, and art…they were the only remembrance left in the world of the Air Nomads entire civilization…and those savages sauntered in and started smashing up the place without so much as batting an eye. He hoped he did scare them. Maybe next time they’d think twice before destroying something irreplaceable.

“That was bad enough…but no, the real problem is who those people actually were. Their leader is a guy known as the Mechanist. He’s the weapons designer for Fire Nation.”

Harry explained, shaking off his grim thoughts.

“So they’re just pretending to be Earth Kingdom refugees?”

“No. He’s Earth Kingdom. He’s been aiding Fire Nation for years. He and his group lost their homes
in a flood or something, his son got hurt and he’s now paralyzed. He said Fire Nation threatened to kill his son and the rest of his people if he didn’t aid them. He’s a mechanical genius or something. He designed several things that Earth Kingdom needs to be made aware of.”

“Tell me.”

So, Harry did—earthbender proof tanks, incendiary bombs, a giant drill that could conceivably take down the last true refuge left in the Earth Kingdom.

“I have good news” Harry added once he finished his recitation. “The Mechanist is terrified enough of me that he quite willingly spilled his guts on the weak points of his weapons, and what needs to be done to fight them. He was sent to the air temple to steal the work of the nomads to design air ships for Fire Nation. I have informed him in no uncertain terms that he will not be doing so. We’re probably going to be staying at the Northern Temple for a little while. Someone from Fire Nation will be coming by in two weeks to check on the Mechanist’s progress. We intend to stick around. He seems quite certain that once he tells them he won’t be making weapons for them anymore that they’ll make good on their threat to kill all of them. So, we’re expecting a pitched battle for the temple…and I’m also hoping we can get a lead on the factory they’re making the weapons at once he designs them. It will certainly be easier to take out weapons he’s already designed while they’re still being built, and not being manned by soldiers.”

“We were going to head back towards Earth Kingdom now that we’re certain no one else is likely to be bothering anyone up here. I’m sure our allies will be very interested in all this.”

“That was my thought as well. You’ve got two weeks, after that... I don’t know how quickly a strike force will be mobilized after the Mechanist makes his move. Some help for the assault on the weapons factory would be appreciated—that’s if we even get led to it, we might only find the location of the nearest outpost.”

“So...you don’t want our help with the temple, just the base or factory...whichever it is?” Hakoda clarified.

“Of course. At the temple, those Earth Kingdom bastards are going to fight back and become part of the solution, or I’m going to start chucking them off the mountain.”

Hakoda and Arnook blinked and then shrugged philosophically.

“Fair enough.”

“What will you do with them afterwards?”

“Afterwards?”

“Yes. If these people aren’t warriors and have made it a habit of years to pander to the Fire Nation in order to be safe, they’ll likely go right back to doing that once all of you are gone, regardless of whether or not it’s actually in their best interests to do so.”

“That’s probably true. I don’t know...I guess I could take them to Ba Sing Se or something.”

“I’ll mention that to the general when I see him again. I’ve heard tell that you need papers or something giving you permission to travel into Ba Sing Se. I’ll see if he can arrange something like that so they can actually get in.”

“That would be helpful. It won’t really do much good to take them there if they’re just going to get captured again because they can’t get into the city.”
“Sir! A ship is coming this way. It looks like the Royal Procession ship.”

“Azula’s coming? Why is Azula coming?”

“Perhaps she was sent out to discover what happened to the fleet the unlamented Admiral Zhao absconded with. I’m certain they must have realized something was wrong when they stopped receiving regular reports from the southern waters.” Iroh replied. “You should try some of this tea, nephew. It’s really quite delicious.”

“That still doesn’t explain why she’s coming here.”

“I would think that would be obvious, nephew. Lieutenant Jee said there were two other ships that survived the siege at the North Pole. She must have made contact with them and is now coming here to see if any of the men here knows anything of interest.”

“Lieutenant Jee? Do we still have a messenger hawk?”

“Yes, Prince Zuko.”

“Good. Send a message off to Azula’s ship.”

Jee nodded and dug around for something to jot down the prince’s message.

“Greetings etc… While I will admit I was not fond of the late Admiral Zhao, as your brother I feel I should at least offer my condolences in this time of grief. It is no easy thing to lose a fiancé, and I’m sure it will take some time to recover. Nonetheless, I will admit I am happy you will not end up bearing a litter of monkey-faced children.

Regards, etc.”

“No one wants to be a monkey’s uncle.” Iroh agreed cheerfully, which set off a round of laughter among the men.

“Sir…are you trying to have me killed?” Lieutenant Jee demanded.

Zuko sighed and waved him off.

“Fine, fine. I’ll write it myself.”

Once Zuko had written his letter and sent it off, he climbed up to a high point on one of the temple towers to watch the ship through a telescope. He really wanted to see if he could catch her reaction. Lieutenant Jee sent the ship to hide on the other side of the island, just in case the princess didn’t take her brother’s condolence message very well.

The hawk returned an hour later.

Greetings, etc. Should I be concerned, Zuzu? You seem to have lost your mind while wandering the world as a poor, lost vagabond these many years. Either that, or you tried acquiring a sense of humor. You failed…miserably, but then, that’s normal for you, isn’t it? Regards, etc.

Zuko grimaced as he read her message, and reminded himself that he’d decided to let go of Azula. She was their father’s creature through and through, and he’d already decided he was no longer going to be a part of their twisted family dynamics any longer.
He continued telling himself that while he wrote out a reply.

Greetings, etc. Ah...you seem to be slipping, sister dear, if you were unaware of Zhao's plotting, or his plans for your future. In fact, given that dear monkey-boy seems to have gotten a promotion *after* I had him arrested, it would seem that a lot of things have been slipping back on the old home front. You might want to get on that. Regards, etc.

The men on the island watched bemusedly as the hawk flew back and forth from the island to the ship as it slowly grew closer to where they were. The royal procession ship was a lot larger than the little blockade runner they had used to get there. The shore was rather rocky in most places, so it was forced to stay some distance from them, in deep water.

Most of the men had made themselves scarce and went to hide...that is rest...out of the way of the royal sibling squabble, in the towers furthest from where the prince was. Guru Pathik went with them. He was already annoyed enough that half of Fire Nation had decided to set up camp in the midst of his normally quiet temple home. He didn’t want to be there should the prince and his sister come to blows. He stifled a sigh as he went and found an out of the way corner to get in some quiet meditation. Prince Zuko had made tremendous progress over the weeks he’d been there. He really hated to see it all undone.

Iroh watched the last of the men leave, and then turned to watch his nephew send off another missive to the princess’ ship, which was just off the coast. Zuko watched the bird fly away, dusted off his hands and then rose to head into the temple complex.

“Nephew? Have you concluded your correspondence with your sister?”

“No. She’ll probably be here soon. I need to go get ready.”

“She’s coming here? Wait...how are you going to get ready? Your armor is on the ship, and Lieutenant Jee sent it away so it wouldn’t be in the way of her temper if you pissed her off too much.”

“I’m clothed, that’s plenty. No, that wasn’t what I meant by get ready.”

Iroh gathered up his tea pot and cups, and the bowl of fruit he’d been snacking on, and followed his nephew into the nearest part of the temple. He could admit he was beyond curious at what the prince was planning.

He found Zuko examining the second room to the right off the main entrance. There was a stone platform with pillars along the front towards the back of the room, and it was to this that Zuko headed. Iroh set down his things, and then went and found a small table in one of the nearby rooms, which he set up in the corner, out of sight next to the doorway.

He set up his tea things and started brewing a new pot, and then settled in to see what his nephew was going to do next. He was rather disappointed when all he did was settle onto the platform in a meditative position and wait quietly.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed when they suddenly heard an angry woman’s voice shouting for them.

“ZUZU! Where are you! Show yourself.”
Zuko smiled to himself and set the platform on fire, until he was sitting wreathed in a veritable sea of flame.
Iroh’s eyebrows rose. He could hear Azula’s footsteps halt and then start towards them.

“ZUZU! You had better…”

Iroh’s eyebrows rose again as Azula’s angry tirade and stalk ended abruptly as she stepped into the room and was confronted with the fiery platform. She visibly took hold of herself and continued forward in a more calm and dignified manner and came to a halt a few feet from the platform. For a moment, just a moment, she looked like she was going to fall to her knees and kowtow. She caught herself before she did so and straightened her back as her hands slowly clenched at her sides.

Zuko stood up on the platform and the flames died away. He took two steps to reach the edge, hopped down, stepped forward to meet her. Then…he hugged her.
Azula froze, and her hands stopped mid-clench.

“You can cry, if you want. I missed you too.” Zuko said quietly.

Azula stiffened and wrenched herself from his arms and staggered backwards out of reach. He seemed to have expected that, as he didn’t try to hold on to her.
He simply watched her patiently as she hunched in on herself, and her face twisted in confusion and grief. Only then did he step forward and wrap his arms around her again.
She began to struggle, but he just tightened his hold on her.

“Let go of me, you fool!”
“Never.”

That one word, so quietly emphatic, seemed to take the fight out of her. She struggled for a moment longer and then sagged in his arms as her hands came up to bunch in his shirt. He gathered her up and rested his chin on her head, and tightened his hold on her.

This time, she hugged him back.
All Iroh could think as he watched the two of them was that their relationship was even more complicated than he’d surmised from the little Zuko had told him while they’d been on the island. He rose quietly from his seat and left the room. He had a feeling Azula wouldn’t take too kindly to him seeing her in such condition. He’d come back when she’d had time to pull herself together.

“Zuko? Are you here?”
“In here, uncle.”

Iroh peeked his head into the room, wondering at what he would find.

After witnessing the scene earlier, he was less surprised than he otherwise would have been to find Azula and Zuko sitting together quietly, drinking his tea and snacking on his fruit bowl. The only sign of Azula’s earlier distress was that she wasn’t wearing any makeup. She must have washed her face earlier; all signs of tears were gone, and she looked as cool and composed as she normally did.

“You really know how to throw quite the royal welcome.” Azula sniffed disdainfully, as she looked around pointedly at the bare stone floor upon which they were seated, and the bare table that held only Iroh’s tea set and the half-empty bowl of fruit.
“Be happy I didn’t bring you any onion-banana juice…though I’ll admit, it kind of grows on you after a while.”

“Onion banana...urgh. You really have been away from civilization for a terribly long time, haven’t you?”

“Ah, Azula, my dear niece, how lovely to see you again.” Iroh said cheerfully as he stepped into the room.

Azula simply gave him an arch look in return.

“Oh, I’m sure.”

Iroh ignored her. “You don’t mind if I join you?”

“Not at all uncle, take a seat.” Zuko answered before she could say anything snide.

They drank their tea quietly for a moment, and then Zuko began their conversation again.

“How are Mai and Ty Lee anyway? I haven’t seen them for a couple of years now either.”

Azula shrugged nonchalantly, and he realized, whatever the answer was, she wasn’t happy about it, but was pretending otherwise.

“Both on the continent. Mai’s father has been made governor of Omashu. She and her family just traveled there a few weeks ago to take over running the place. Ty Lee ran away from home and joined the circus, if you can believe it.”

Zuko snorted and shook his head. “Strangely, that doesn’t actually surprise me at all. She’s always been quite the acrobat; she’ll probably fit right in.”

“Probably, but that’s not really the point, is it? It’s a rather bizarre life-choice for the daughter of a nobleman.”

“If it makes her happy, what’s the big deal?”

“There are standards that need to be upheld, Zuzu. Surely even you realize this.”

“She has a whole bunch of older sisters, doesn’t she? It’s not like she herself was ever going to be anyone particularly important, and she never enjoyed all the restrictions or the pomp that went with being a nobleman’s daughter any more than Mai did. Still…it must be rather quiet at the palace these days.”

“I’ve hardly noticed they’re gone, really. I’ve been terribly busy, sitting in on war meetings. We’ve been making great strides in the war effort these past months. There’s a lot to do.”

“I’m sure you’ve been a great help. You always were quite the strategist, though I imagine you’d rather be out there doing something. Sitting quietly was never really your thing.”

Azula’s eyes narrowed slightly at her brother’s compliment.

“Your hair looks ridiculous, by the way.”

Zuko smiled wryly and ran his hand over the light peach fuzz that lined his skull.

“I suppose it does. It’ll look better in a few weeks once it’s had time to grow out more. You should
feel it though, it feels really weird.”

He leaned his head forward, offering a chance for her to do so. Azula just stared at him a moment, then reached out a hesitant hand to run over his hair. She made a face and withdrew her hand, then rolled her eyes when Zuko laughed at her.

“You always were easily amused.”

“I doubt uncle would agree with you.”

“Indeed, I have often despaired of this boy. Be happy that you seem to have missed the worst of his angry, broody, teenage years.”

“He was broody as a child. Believe me, I haven’t missed that at all.”

Zuko stuck his tongue out at them both, which was so out of character it startled a laugh out of her.

“I noticed you haven’t asked after father.”

“Why would I?”

Azula’s face went slack with shock and then tightened in anger.

“Because he’s our father and he’s the Fire Lord.”

Zuko shrugged, still calm and composed even in the face of her anger.

“You never mention mom.”

Azula flinched, just a bit, but it was there.

“What does she have to do with anything!”

“You had the same relationship, in some ways, with mom as I always had with dad. You’re never sure why, but everything always seems to be the wrong answer, and no matter what you do it never seems to be enough. All you really know is that they seem to want you to be a completely different person.”

Azula’s face went blank, and though she seemed unaffected by his words, her hands still tightened on her tea cup.

“And so, it’s easier sometimes to just put them out of your thoughts, because thinking about them is never a happy occasion, and it wears you down.”

Azula recovered her equilibrium and laughed at him disdainfully.

“You’re pathetic.”

“I’m honest. You’d be surprised how much it helps.”

Azula stared at him mutely for a long moment and then broke eye contact. She knocked back the last of her tea before rising gracefully to her feet.

“Well, this has been fun.” She drawled, her voice heavy with sarcasm. “But I really should be going. It’s a long trip back to the capital and I still have to report my findings to father.”

“I’ll walk you to the shore.”
“That won’t be necessary, I assure you.”

“Of course it is.”

Zuko rose from his seat and joined his sister, then threw a companionable arm across her shoulders.

“It’s been three years since we last saw each other. Who knows when, or if, we’ll ever see each other again.”

“Indeed. It has been a long time, Azula.” Iroh agreed as he too pulled himself to his feet. Zuko stepped aside so he could embrace her.

“Take care of yourself, niece. Don’t let your father work you too hard. You’re a young girl. You should have a chance to do something fun once in a while.”

Azula patted him gingerly on the shoulder and stepped back as soon as he released her. She looked rather weirded out by how touchy-feely they’d both gotten since she’d seen them last.

“Yesss…goodbye, uncle.”

“Shall we?”

Azula nodded and started for the door at a brisk walk. The sooner she was away from hippie central the better.

As Azula’s ship pulled out, Iroh and Zuko stood at the shore and waved goodbye.

“I will admit, nephew, I don’t really understand most of what happened here.”

Zuko sighed and tried to put his insight into words.

“I guess it just occurred to me at some point while we were trading letters back and forth that Azula was probably as messed up, if not moreso, than I was. Ever since we were little she’s worked really hard to be what our father wanted. She had to be perfect, always. You saw how she acted when she walked in and saw a shadowy figure seated on a fiery platform. She’s so well trained she just sucked down her anger and her irritation and became a perfect little soldier puppet. The thing is, all she really wants is for someone to love her—same as me, really. So, I took a gamble. It could have went badly if I had really miscalculated. It seems I was right though, about everything; more right than even I realized, given how strongly she reacted. She was so off balance though, that probably explains most of it. She used to calculating how the people around her will react and planning events to the last detail so that she’s always in complete control. She gets nervous when things don’t go as planned. So, I used that to my advantage and threw her off her game.”

Zuko sighed again, pensively, and shook his head.

“All these years, I always used to get so angry at her. No one has ever been able to get under my skin the way she does. It’s because she knows me so well. The thing I realized was that I know her just as well, and so in theory I should be able to get under her skin like no one else can. It seems I was right.”

He watched the retreating ship for a while, lost in thought, before speaking again, and when he did, it was quietly, and his voice was laced with regret and a small amount of guilt.
“I was ready to just write her off, you know. I was going to just throw her away. She’s hurt me a lot in the past. The thing I realized was is that I can’t, not really. For better or worse, she’s still my sister and she always will be. Even if I never see her again in my life, she’s still a part of me…and whether or not she wants to admit it, I’m still a part of her.”

He smiled slightly then.

“Right now, she’s probably locked up in her room, brooding, and going over every word we exchanged and every expression that crossed my face and analyzing all of it to death. She’s going to be bewildered and unsettled at how easily I was able to flummox her. After she’s sorted all that out to her satisfaction, she’s going to go raiding the library for stuff about the Fire Sages and the Air Nomads and what sort of spiritual training they underwent, and then she’s going to start practicing it. That’s what she does. She’ll decide that obviously the only way for her to protect herself from whatever weirdness I’ve acquired is to become enlightened, and do it faster and better than I myself am doing. If she sticks with it, and actually puts the required effort into it, it will probably help her. If she ends up becoming the next Fire Lord, she may be able to do a better job of it than my father has. If I do, I might be able to trust her at my back. Either way, it will be better than how things are now…maybe. She might just put everything out of her mind and just decide it was me being weird and of no more consequence. Either way, I had to try, didn’t I?”

Iroh nodded gravely. “Indeed nephew. You seem to have gained great wisdom in your time here.”

“I still don’t understand your confusing proverbs.”

“Ah well, we can’t have everything, I suppose.”

Uncle and nephew shared a wry smile and lapsed into thoughtful silence, which was broken when Zuko spoke again.

“I think it’s time for us to leave and continue our search.”

“You have not completed your training, nephew.”

“I know, but I was thinking about it. The last chakra, in order to clear it, you’re supposed to detach yourself from the world. I’m a part of the world though. I could end up as the next Fire Lord, I might not…at this point, I don’t really know what my destiny is. If I’m detached, I can’t really be a good leader though, can I? If anything, I think that’s kind of been the problem. Grandfather, father…they both were and are so detached from the country and the rest of the world, that they can just send our people out to die in droves and to kill thousands and they don’t care. I don’t think any of those people they sent out to die are even real to them. Father sees everyone around him as a tool, whose worth is determined on whether he feels you either further his ambitions or don’t. If you don’t, you’re removed so you’re no longer in the way. On the off chance that I do become Fire Lord someday…I have to be able to care, and I have to be a part of the world, not look down on it from on high. That really only works if you remove yourself from the world and go live in a temple. It’s quiet here, and peaceful, and there are no conflicts. The rest of the world isn’t like that. While I’ll admit I feel better than I have in years, maybe even my whole life, I don’t think I’m supposed to complete this training until I know where my destiny lies.”

Iroh stroked his beard as he thought over his nephew’s words.

“Personally, I think you are probably making a mistake, and yet, I can see the value in all you’ve said. Very well, what do you suggest?”

“Part of me wants to just go and continue my search for the avatar…but I think there’s something else I need to do first.”
“And that is?”

“I need to complete my firebender training.”

“Then that is what we shall do.”
Harry and Sokka go a-ninja-ing while the others stay behind to defend the northern air temple. They regroup later to help free a town from Fire Nation control. Aang has love troubles.

“You’ll regret this.”

“I stand by my word. I won’t design weapons for you any longer.” the Mechanist replied, voice shaking.

“Is that so? Then enjoy your last night on earth. You have nowhere to run. You will pay for backing out of our deal.”

War Minister Qin gave the Mechanist a disdainful shove, before stalking out of the temple and back down the long road that led from it down the mountain.

“Here he comes, and he doesn’t look happy.” Sokka warned.

“Good, that means the Mechanist kept up his part of the bargain. Now, let’s hope he leads us somewhere worthwhile.” Harry commented.

They were high above the ground, nearly in the clouds, on Harry’s carpet. He had put a chameleon charm on the bottom so it would blend in with the sky around it, since Sokka freaked out too much when he made the two of them and the carpet invisible.

At the moment, Harry was steering, and Sokka was watching the progress of the War Minister, and his escort, which he’d left at the bottom of the road, as they returned back to wherever they’d come from.

They headed for the river, and from there released a hawk. The Minister and his escort didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

“Watch them or follow the hawk?”

“Follow the hawk. They’re sending for reinforcements. We need to see where the message goes.”

They were high enough, they could see quite a distance in all directions. The hawk followed the river down a ways and then dove down into the greenery that surrounded the beginnings of a desert up ahead.

“If I remember the map correctly, Ba Sing Se is on the other side of the desert that way. If we continue to follow the river down, it should eventually open into a big lake, and there’s another river that empties out near northern Fire Nation.”

“A good spot for a base or a factory then.”
“Yep, and there it is.”

It was more than just a base, it seemed a whole small village had been set up there. There were numerous tanks lined up in regimented rows, pens full of animals, Dozens of warehouses and hundreds of men loading and unloading them—raw metal, stacks of logs, machinery, crates of all sizes. There was a sizeable mining operation going on nearby, and there were dozens of buildings all sporting smokestacks, which filled the air with thick, black smoke. It looked like a big scar on the land.

The mountains and the ground all around were stained from both the runoff from the mines, and the soot from all the factories. The forest had been denuded for miles in all directions. The area all throughout the mountain range was beautiful, except for here, where all that could be seen was metal, smoke and fire.

“If Fire Nation isn’t stopped…our whole world is eventually going to look like that, isn’t it?”

“Pretty much, yeah. Even if they are stopped, I have a feeling a lot of the world is going to look like that regardless. That’s the thing about technology—once it’s come into use, it doesn’t just go away. Think about it…you look at this and you’re revolted…and yet you’ve spent hours with the Mechanist every day since we met him, designing machines…even knowing what the use the machines he’s already made have been put to, even though he’s been collaborating with Fire Nation.”

Sokka averted his eyes, feeling rather ashamed of himself when it was put that way.

“Don’t look like that. It doesn’t make you evil to get a thrill from figuring out a problem or finding some new way to deal with it, or to just imagine the possibilities. It’s just that there’s always a tradeoff, and to folks with ‘magic powers’ this” he indicated the factories “is alien and upsetting, and given how my own world is, a sign of what’s to come. For folks who don’t have ‘magic powers’, this, technology, is your equivalent. It isn’t fair for someone who can just ‘wave their hands around’ to make stuff happen to stand in the way of people making things to make their lives easier and more productive, and there’s no shame in taking pride in being able to do it and do it well…but it’s kind of at the root of the reason why magic folk and non-magic folk can never seem to coexist together for long. It seems like there should be some way to find a happy balance between the two, but what that might be I can’t imagine. Let’s just get all this mapped out and send word to your dad and the others.”

Sokka was pensive and silent as they sketched out a rough map of the base and surrounding area. While they were busy a large contingent of soldiers and tanks set off towards the Northern Air Temple.

“It feels wrong, staying here, when we know they’re going to be fighting. We should be with them.”

“It does, but what we’re doing here is important too. Anyway, between the Mechanist’s work, Aang, Katara and Toph, they should be fine. Hell, Toph is a one-woman army by herself, and Aang and Katara are certainly no slouches.”

“They’d better be alright. I’ll never forgive myself if they’re not.”

“They’ll have the high ground, and they’re prepared. If anything, we should be feeling sorry for all those soldiers heading out.”
After one of the maps they’d made was sent off with Hedwig, they found a shallow cave on a mountainside overlooking the town and set up camp.

“After nightfall, we should sneak down and scout around some. Anything we can add to what we can tell everyone before we make our assault will be helpful.” Sokka mused.

“Not to mention we can set up some of the buildings to blow now rather than during a pitched battle.” Harry offered.

“Yeah. Every little bit helps.”

Harry had been busy during the last two weeks, preparing explosives. They were a lovely combination of science and magic, really. At the center was a rune-inscribed stone with a bombardment charm embedded in it, surrounding that was a layer of blasting jelly—an invention of the Mechanist’s, and surrounding that was a shell inscribed with more runes that would ignite the blasting jelly and the bombardment charm—which was mostly there just to give the whole thing a bit more ‘oomph’. What was really special about them was that they could be set off from a distance via detonator. The detonator was a box with a row of buttons inside. Every four bombs was linked to a button. They could be set up somewhere and then left there until needed. They were small and rather innocuous—the bombardment charm eliminated the need for a large amount of blasting jelly, and so would be unobtrusive when they peppered the town with them. The number of men who showed up for the assault would determine whether they set them off to begin the battle, or to end it.

As it grew closer to nightfall, they got changed into clothing they’d brought with them just for this purpose. All of it was done in shades of grey, and made purposefully asymmetrical to break up their human outline in the dark. Sokka had a fanny pack loaded down with explosives, as did Harry. He’d made them for just such a purpose—though he’d made the insides only slightly bigger than the outside; illogical things upset Sokka’s view of the world and how it should be, but he didn’t notice the slight discrepancy.

Once dressed, they waited for full nightfall and climbed back on the carpet and crouched low over it so they wouldn’t be seen in the dark.

Harry landed them on a large roof in the center of the village, then rolled up the carpet and tucked it away.

They had to spend some time crouched up there, timing out patrols and orienting themselves with the layout of the village from down below, not just from far above. Their work was made easier by the fact that this village was the only thing around for miles in any direction, and the guards were correspondingly relaxed and unvigilant, though they both realized that could change in an instant. Their job was to ghost through the town unseen and unheard, gather more information and rig the place to blow, that was all.

When the moment was right, they each darted off in opposite directions, with only a whisper of sound and a small thud to betray them, to disappeared into the night.

“Sir! There’s a navy destroyer on its way here!”

“A navy destroyer? Here? What in the world…”

Sergant Lon hurried out of his office and gaped along with the rest of his men at the large, somewhat
battered naval ship that was coasting down the river.

They saw a few figures on deck, one of whom spotted them and ran to the rail.

“People! By Agni! You have no idea how glad I am to see all of you!”

“Is he crying?”

“Seems to be trying not to, sir.”

“We were beginning to think we were the last people left in all the world…but you’re all safe. The ocean spared you!”

“You don’t think…but they must have, didn’t they? They must be survivors of the North Pole.”

“It’s been weeks…you don’t really think…”

“Who else could they be?”

“Do you have any supplies?” The figure up on deck called down hopefully. “Just enough to get us home? We were commandeered along the way and not given time to properly resupply for a long campaign. We were hiding out, trying to figure out how to run this monster with the few of us that are left.”

“Where’s the rest of your people?”

“Dead. Everyone’s dead. All that’s left is what you see here, really. We were the support crew. We were down below or close to when everything started. We managed to lock everything down enough to stay afloat. I think…I think we’re the only survivors.”

The folks from the ship were a sorry lot—clothes ragged, most of them were more bandages than not. The guy who did all the talking was a mass of nervous twitches and staring eyes; it was rather unnerving, really. He looked like a man who had stared into the abyss, and now could no longer see anything but that before his eyes. There was another, big giant of a man, he was. He kept getting wobbly-lipped and looking like he was going to cry. One of the guys was going to tell him to man up already, but the rest of the ragged group looked so terrified, the words just dried up in his mouth. The last two…they were twitchy too. Any time anyone said ‘ocean’, ‘north pole’ or ‘squid’, they clutched each other and started screaming. Major Lon felt badly for the poor bastards, really he did, but he mostly wanted them to go far, far away.

“I’m real sorry to hear about all your troubles…especially the uh, fish monster, and the killer squid men. That’s sounds…awful…honest.” He consoled. Personally, he thought they’d all just lost their minds, but it didn’t hurt to pretend he believed them. “We can resupply you a bit, and you can actually do us a good turn as well. The ship that was supposed to come to get all this stuff here never showed up”

“Zhao!” the four men all growled, before spitting on the ground in unison.

“Yeah… um, but anyway…you’ve got that big old ship, and it’s mostly empty…”

“DEAD! ALL DEAD!” one of the screamers suddenly shouted, while his friend covered his eyes and went “AAAAAHHHHHH!”

Lon and his men all jumped in fright.

“Yeaaaah…look, just…sit tight for a bit while we finish loading up the ship, alright? If you continue down this way, you’ll eventually come to a big lake. There’s another base there. You can drop off the tanks and whatnot, get more supplies and head home.”
“Home.”
“Home.” The big man sniffled.
“I want my mommy.”
“Me too.”

“Yeah. There, there. I’m gonna…go outside for a bit and see how the loading is going.”

Lon and his men made a hasty retreat and left the shattered survivors behind them.

“Man, poor bastards.”
“I’ll say.”
“Schmucks, I say. I mean seriously…giant fish monster and killer squid men? If you ask me, they’ve all been drinking cactus juice.”
“I think they’ve been through a terrible ordeal. It makes me glad to be out here, at the back end of nowhere. We’re doing our part for the war effort, and we’ll live through it to retire.”
“I could use a bit more excitement.”
“Shut your mouth, Chen, you don’t want to tempt fate.”

They got to the docks and saw the quartermaster checking off the last items on his list.

“Finished?”

“Just about. This bunch here is the last of it.”

“Good. The sooner the loonies get going the better. I’m going to have nightmares tonight, I just know it.”

“It’s probably just midnight sun madness. I heard about that; it drives people crazy sometimes. Makes you wonder why we sent a whole bloomin fleet off to the ruddy poles for. There’s nothing up there anyone wants, so why bother?”

“Ours is not to question why”
“Yeah yeah, ours it but to do and die. Lousy code if you ask me.”

“Alright, that looks like the last of it. They can head out anytime now.”

“Good, the sooner we see the backs of those guys, the better, as far as I’m concerned.”

The guys of the base waved off the four poor bastards on the destroyer as they left, using it as an excuse to put off work for a little while. They were in the back end of nowhere and nothing of interest ever happened around there. There wasn’t really anything of interest to do around there either —just work, work and more work.

“Well, that was diverting for what, an hour? Back to the grind. Man, I wish something exciting would happen for once!”

“Don’t tempt the fates.” Lon warned.

A sudden ‘whoosh’ and a huge cloud of black smoke drew everyone’s attention.

“The lumberyard!”

“Hey…does it seem kinda…foggy…all of a sudden?”

“Don’t be silly, it doesn’t get foggy around here.”
“Uh, chief? It’s getting kinda foggy around here.”

“AAAHH!!”

“What! What is it?”

“Something bit me! Wh-who’s there?”

“Is that…a squid man?”

“RUN AWAY!”

“If we live through this, you are in so damn much trouble for tempting the fates, boy.”

“Understood sir.”

The next hour was a terrifying time for all of them: squid men and icy dragons with big teeth, and ghostly wolf-man warriors kept looming out of the mist and biting or clobbering them. They could hear the sounds of destruction all around.

When finally, a small, ragged band of wounded men made it past the base and into the safety of the mountains beyond, they huddled together and prayed they made it through the night.

“The fog is rolling back. It looks like it’s continuing down the river. We’re saved!”

“BOOM!”

The men all screamed and hit the dirt as one after another, the buildings in the base started exploding. They stayed down while flaming debris rained down around their heads and watched mutely as thick, black clouds filled the sky, and their animals all went running off, panicked by the fire and the explosions.

“At least we got the last shipment out before all this happened.”

“Yeah…at least there’s that.” Major Lon agreed glumly.

“You’re going to get in trouble, aren’t you?”

“Me? Hell no. I’m going to blame it all on War Minister Qin. He took all the soldiers away to try to pry his pet project out of the impregnable fortress he stuffed him in. This is all his fault.”

“Good thinking sir.”

There was a big party on the recovered Fire Nation ship that night.

“I can’t believe that worked so well.” Hakoda admitted with a laugh. “Though I suppose it wouldn’t have been nearly as effective without you lot softening them up for us.”

“We were so very wretched.” Sokka agreed. “That was fun. I can’t believe they gave us all those supplies and tanks.”

“It was a perfect coup all around. We completely disrupted their operations, wiped out their military forces, stole all their earthbenders from the mines, blew up all their factories, and denied needed machinery and supplies to their forces all in one fell swoop. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m pretty damned proud of the job we did.” Bato chortled.
“Hear, hear!”

“We should probably hit the other base while we’re here. Do you think the same trick would work twice?”

“Couldn’t hurt—I took all the messenger hawks the other night while we were setting the explosives.”

“When we’re done we need to head off to retrieve the earthbenders’ families so they can’t be struck down in retaliation.”

“I thought you made it look like they were all eaten?” Hakoda asked curiously.

“I did, but just in case anyone sees through the trick for what it is, we should make sure everyone is safe.” Harry agreed.

“Maybe we should split up then. You kids take care of retrieving the families, and the rest of us will hit the base.”

“Can do. We’ll scout ahead and send back an overhead map of the place with Hedwig so you’re not all going in blind.”

“That would be much appreciated. The one you sent us of the last base was a great help. Now… enough talk of war…let’s party.”

Appa, much as he liked the big brute, was really damned conspicuous—far too conspicuous to hover overhead while they mapped out bases along the waterway.

“Looks like we’re going to split up for a bit again. Follow Hedwig; she’ll show you where the earthbenders’ families are—here’s the list of everyone. Don’t lose it. Try to get word to them about what we’re going to do. I’d suggest making contact with one or two and letting them spread the word—a bunch of strangers walking among them and whispering will be too conspicuous. Sokka and I will make maps for the alliance and then we’ll meet you to plan out the extraction.”

None of them had much liked splitting up again so soon after they were all reunited, but they had to each do their part.

Harry and Sokka hovered far overhead while Sokka made maps and Harry put bombardment charms on pellets in preparation for making more bombs. He was almost out of blasting jelly, but what he had should be enough to bring the base to its knees.

They waited for nightfall and donned their ‘ninja outfits’ and did some up close scouting, once Harry had more bombs to plant. Sokka had come a long way from the gangly boy Harry had met months prior, and they made a good team.

They didn’t have enough bombs to pepper the whole area, so they snuck around, studied what was there and picked their targets carefully to do the most damage. Harry also made a point of sabotaging as many of the tanks and weapons as he could manage in the time they had.

When they retreated to their camp, they found Hedwig had returned. They made careful notes on the map of where the sabotage and bombs were, then packaged it and the small detonator and sent it off, before heading out to rendezvous with Aang and the others.
“I see the town…but where the heck are Aang, Katara and Toph?”

“Hopefully it’s a good sign that they seem to be so well hidden.”

“You don’t think they were captured or anything?”

“There’s no signs of a battle, and those three, not to mention Appa, would have made a big mess while evading capture—they wouldn’t have gone quietly.” Harry disagreed.

They both spotted the small white figure bouncing happily in a tree top at the center of a lush forest at the same time.

“Momo! They must be hiding in the forest.”

Momo hopped onto the carpet and chattered at them while climbing all over them both when Harry brought the carpet in close.

“Shhh…do you hear that?”

“Yeah…voices. They’re not just hidden in the forest…they’re in the trees.”

The forest went on for what looked like miles in all directions, and the individual trees were massive behemoths with thick foliage rather reminiscent of the trees of Konoha. With a bit of searching, they found a clearing that allowed them to drop down below the leaves, and a long, quiet flight later brought them to the treetop village they’d heard earlier.

The trees erupted in birdsong, and suddenly there were two-dozen armed children, all sporting the grim, businesslike air of professional soldiers, surrounding them on all sides.

“NO! Stop! They’re the friends we were telling you about!”

Katara was suddenly there, standing protectively between the hovering carpet and the end of the platform, arms and legs akimbo as she used her body as a living shield between them and the kid soldiers.

A boy, older than most, if not all, of the children, swaggered out and looked them both over suspiciously. He was obviously the leader, given not only how he held himself, but how the other kids all looked to him for instruction.

“Odd looking friends. They look like assassins to me.”

“Harry! Sokka! You’re back!”

Aang was suddenly there as well, flitting out from deeper in the village. He seemed oblivious to the tension, but Harry wasn’t fooled—he was just diffusing things in the way he did best.

Momo hopped onto his head when he alighted on the carpet between them, and he settled down on an open space, all smiles.

“Why are you both dressed like that? You look a little scary…and funny, but mostly scary.”

“We were sneaking around the base most of the night. The clothes are to help us blend into the shadows and break up our human outline in the dark. People notice other people sneaking around, even when they can’t see well—if our outlines don’t look like people, we get ignored.” Harry
replied, while pushing back the hood and face covering. Sokka did the same as the leader gestured for the kids to put up their weapons.

After they’d gotten settled and the kids had gathered around, the leader stood up to strut a bit and make sure everyone’s attention was on him.

“I’m Jet, and these are my freedom fighters. We’ve been working to free Gaipan of Fire Nation for some time now, so we’re going to allow all of you to assist us.”

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes—Sokka didn’t, but he kept it low-key enough that Jet simply ignored him. Katara watched the guy’s every move with shining eyes and something akin to hero-worship on her face. She was also blushing…and Jet did seem to be doing most of his strutting for her.

He slanted a sideways look at Aang, but he seemed pretty oblivious to it all, oddly enough…if anything, he seemed to have a healthy dose of hero worship himself.

After hearing the guy talk, it was sort of understandable.

They were all orphans who had lost their homes and families to the Fire Nation, and been left alone and destitute with no one to turn to—until Jet found them, gathered them up, and formed them up into a resistance movement.

Peter Pan and the Lost Boys, living in a tree-top village hideout; harrying the enemy and giving themselves a purpose to go on living when everything else was lost.

It was all very admirable…but something about the guy still set his teeth on edge. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but there was an edge of deep, bitter hatred when he spat the words ‘Fire Nation’, the way his fingers would clench and dance as he spoke of the soldiers in the area and the losses they’d all suffered.

He had a feeling Jet was one of those guys who clutched his hatred to himself, nursed it in the dark of night, and had made it his sole reason for being. So long as he had soldiers to fight and a regular outlet for that hatred, he could keep functioning and keep moving and keep getting up every morning. It would be too easy for something like that to rage out of control though—he’d seen what sort of effect living on only a steady diet of dark emotions had on a person long term; Voldemort was a perfect case in point.

It wasn’t his fault, really—by the sound of it, he’d been quite young when he saw his whole family slaughtered, and his village burned before his eyes. He carried a heavy burden of guilt for fleeing into the night, rather than saving everyone. He’d had to grow up too fast, and had been at war every day since then with no end in sight.

Under circumstances like that, it would be an easy trap to fall into.

He hoped he found some way to purge the bitterness from his soul before it consumed him—he seemed like a good guy: brash, overconfident and a bit full of himself, but a good guy—you could tell that much by the regard with which the children he’d gathered held him in.

“We’ve already worked out our plan of attack while we were waiting for you two.” Jet informed them with a cocky smirk.

“Oh? Let’s hear it then.”
“We’re going to blow up the reservoir and wash these Fire Nation scum from the face of the earth!”

“YEAH!” the children cheered.

“I hate to break into your celebration…but did everyone forget to tell you we’re here to rescue the people in the town, not kill them all?” Sokka interrupted.

“Rescue? RESCUE? They’re Fire Nation! Killers! What the hell do you mean rescue?”

“Actually, about half the folks in that town down there are Earth Kingdom, and they’re here against their will, being used as insurance for their earthbending menfolk’s good behavior. We have the men, now we need to rescue the families so they can’t be used for retaliation.” Harry added.

“Wait…are you saying…my daddy might still be alive?” one of the kids spoke up hopefully.

Sokka pinched the bridge of his nose and glared at his sister with irritation. “Just what have you been doing since you’ve been here? I thought you were supposed to be trying to make contact with the families, getting a head count, explaining what we were here to do!”

“She’s been busy mooning over hotpants there.” Toph spoke up cheerfully. “I guess the rest of it must have slipped her mind.”

Katara turned red and began to splutter in embarrassment and rage.

“Well…you’re here! Why didn’t you sneak off and do some of that?” Sokka then demanded.

“Right! I’m stuck in on a wooden platform, miles from the ground! Some big guy carried me up here and then everyone wandered off where I couldn’t follow! I’m blind, people! Why do you keep forgetting that!”

“Well…what have you been doing, Aang?”

“He’s been mooning over hotpants too.” Toph interjected spitefully.

While Aang was spluttering, Sokka continued with weary patience.

“Appa?”

“In a clearing a ways from here. He couldn’t fit in the tree house.”

“Momo, why didn’t you complete the mission!” Sokka asked the lemur in despair. “I mean, really people, work with me here!”

Momo began chattering, gesturing and jumping up and down.

“Oh, you were trying to complete the mission…good job, Momo. At least we can count on you.” he sighed “Okay, new plan then. Katara, try to make contact with the folks in the town tomorrow so we can start spreading the word, find out which of the Freedom fighters has kin among the earthbenders. Jet, what sort of patrols are there in the area? How many soldiers and how often do they come by? Are they in tanks? Wagons? Are they carrying supplies, weapons, what? How far is it by foot to the river from here? We flew, so we don’t really have a good estimate on that…”

“Whoa, slow down there, champ…these are my freedom fighters. I don’t know where you get off thinking you’re in charge!”

“This is our mission…and evidently, had we simply left things alone, all the folks we came here to
"rescue would have ended up dead. All we're doing is trying to find out what we have to work with in terms of distractions, and what sort of logistics we have to work with as far as actually getting everyone away and to the ships safely and without retaliation." Harry interjected to try to quell some of Jet's bristling.

"If they all just flee during a flood, they’re all going to be left completely destitute." Katara pointed out worriedly.

"Yeah, that’s true…I’m sure they’re all going to want to take their stuff with them, but if they’re all fleeing carrying bundles, it’s going to be pretty obvious something is up.” Toph agreed.

"So we rob them beforehand.” Jet scoffed.

"What!” Aang gasped.

"What? It’s a great idea. When you make contact tomorrow, tell them to start bundling stuff they want to take with them and leaving it by a window, because there’s going to be a series of robberies all throughout the town in the coming days.”

"Yeah, like anyone’s going to believe that. They’ll probably think it’s a trick.” one of the freedom fighters scoffed.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Here, you not only have a list with everyone’s names, but this.” Harry unrolled a drawing he’d made of all the rescued earthbenders.

"Daddy!” the kid who’d spoken up earlier cheered, tears in her eyes.

"We’ll have to make a distraction to draw off the soldiers, but that should work.”

"Yeah, we’ll leave it somewhere they can retrieve it later when they’re on their way to the ships. Sokka, do you have the map?"

"Right here.” Sokka agreed, unrolling the map he’d made of the surrounding area as they were approaching.

The kids gathered around the big table in the center of the tree village to add their own bits of knowledge and observations while they hammered out the details. Harry sat back and let Jet take over guiding that part of things—he knew the area better, knew where the best hiding places and escape routes were—and he could already see, if the guy didn’t feel he was in charge, he was going to start having fits and probably end up ruining the whole operation.

It sucked sometimes, always being the mature, reasonable one—but he wasn’t willing to risk innocent people’s lives on his pride…even if, sometimes, he really, really wanted to.

It took a while, but eventually a plan did come together. It was late by that point, and the kids started heading off to their ‘homes’—which were basically just one room shacks made of wood hidden among the branches. There weren’t many houses, and the kids doubled and even tripled up in each—for comfort, for safety and for warmth.

Harry noted Toph stayed put, looking frustrated and a little lost.

"Wanna go back down to the ground?"

"Yeah.”

"I feel like I should apologize…when you agreed to come with us, I didn’t really think about how
“Not your fault, but thanks.”
“It’s still pretty cold in these parts…will you be alright in your rock tent? You’re welcome to share mine if you prefer.”
Toph’s face went scarlet.
“The front room is pretty comfy.” He added pointedly.
“Oh…right. Heh, heh.” Toph stuttered, embarrassed.
“Come on, we can go find Appa and set up camp near him.”

Harry steered Toph around the table to the carpet, where they both took a seat. He saw Sokka and Katara having a quiet hissed conversation a bit further down. He could easily guess what they were arguing about, considering Aang was a short distance away on one side, looking rather gutted, and Jet was a distance away on the other side looking a bit smug. Katara wanted to stay in the treetop village for the night to be close to her new boyfriend—a plan which Jet seemed to like. Sokka wanted her to come with the rest of them—a plan which Aang seemed to like, though he was still thrown by the fact that she wanted to stay.

“We’re heading out. Anyone else coming with?”

Aang immediately started towards them and settled down on the carpet behind Toph. Sokka and Katara glared at each other, and Katara tore her arm away from Sokka’s grasp to follow smirking Jet deeper into the village. Behind them, Aang made a sound like a small, wounded animal.

Sokka huffed and waved the rest of them away, before taking off after Katara, determined to play chaperone whether she liked it or not.
Harry got the carpet moving, and told Hedwig to find Appa.

“Are either of you hungry?”
“I could eat a lion-moose…by myself!”

Aang’s only answer was a depressed sigh, and the sound of his head thudding on the table.

Momo chattered and jumped up and down in excitement. He knew Harry was sneaky, and always seemed to have fresh fruit on hand, even though nothing much seemed to be growing yet.

Harry chuckled at the flying lemur’s antics and searched the kitchen cabinets for one of the scrolls he had set aside in there. He popped out a couple of apples, which he handed out. He gave an extra to Momo to give to Appa. The flying lemur purred and flew off, quite excited by his haul.

“That should tide you over. Soup sound good?”

“Sounds great.”
Aang just sighed again.

“What is with you, Twinkletoes?”

“Katara chose to stay with Jet.”

“Yeah, and?”
“How could she? She’s my forever girl!” Aang whimpered.

“Who? Sugar queen?” Toph scoffed. “ Doesn’t look like it from where I’m sitting. Besides, I don’t think Sugar queen is a ‘forever’ kind of girl… I mean, heck! This is what, her second boyfriend since we’ve all started travelling together?”

“How could she do this to me?”

“Do what, Twinkletoes? It’s not like you two were dating.”

“You just said Jet is her second boyfriend!”

“Uh… Twinkletoes? I hate to break it to you, but I was in no way implying that you were the first.”

“What do you mean? If not me…”

“Haru.”

“Who?”

“The pretty-boy earthbender we met back at the alliance camp. His father is one of the prisoners Hakoda and the others broke out.” Harry answered.

“WHAT? When did this happen?” Aang demanded.

“Duh, when we were all waiting for Padfoot there to show up with all the people from the south pole. Psh, and she was all mopey about leaving there too. She seems to have gotten over him pretty quickly.”

“But… she said she cared about me.” Aang whispered, sounding defeated.

“Who ever said she didn’t?”

Harry busied himself setting out hot soup for everyone, along with some warm buttered bread and a pot of tea. Aang barely touched his food; he just sat there curled up in a little ball of misery. He seemed rather put out by the hearty appetite his two friends exhibited.

“How can you both sit there so calmly when Katara has betrayed me!” he finally exploded. Almost immediately, he looked stricken by his bout of temper, and sunk back into a pathetic ball of misery.

“She didn’t betray you. You two were never like that… and I hate to break it to you Aang, but you probably never were going to be, at least, not right now. In a few years, if you were both still single and all, who knows? Now? Probably never going to happen.”

“What?”

Harry drank down the last of his soup and mopped it up with what was left of his bread and set his bowl aside, before fixing Aang with a sympathetic look.

“It’s nothing you did or didn’t do, I’m sure. The thing is, you’re just at different, um… … developmental stages. You haven’t gone through puberty yet, by the look of it. Katara? She has.”

“Huh?”

“Um… didn’t any of the monks ever give you the, uh, talk?”
“Talk? What talk?”

“Do you know where baby air nomads come from?”

“Yeah—the western air temple.”

Toph started tittering, until Harry glared at her. She mimed buttoning her lip, but she was still grinning like a loon.

“That would be where the nuns lived?”

“Well, yeah. Where else would they come from?”

“Do you know how they got there?”

“Well, sure—the spring festivals.”

Toph snorted and started laughing uproariously, going so far as to fall over and pound on the ground. Aang glared at her, and Harry sighed again.

“Do you know what happened at the spring festivals that made them appear?”

“It has something to do with the sixth arrow.”

Toph calmed down and pulled herself back to a sitting position. “The sixth arrow? What arrow?”

“The sixth…” Harry studied Aang a moment, and stared at the arrow tattoo that graced his forehead, the backs of both hands, and he knew, the tops of both feet. That was five. They were supposed to trace the chakra flows of the body…which meant the sixth arrow had to be…

“Oh. My. God. You have a tattoo there? Don’t tattoos hurt when you first get them? It’s nothing but nerve endings! Really sensitive nerve endings at that! You must not have been able to walk for weeks!”

“Um…why would it hurt? It’s just dye. It reacts to the chi flows and stays there during the ritual. You have to be a master to participate and get the arrows right, which is why it’s the sign of a master.”

“Oh. Well, that’s completely different. I honestly tried to not think too much about how painful your tattoos must have been…and that was before I realized there was a sixth one.”

Toph had been listening quietly to their discussion, with a thoughtful look on her face.

“So…you have tattoos…what are they?”

“It’s a permanent mark or drawing on the skin. Harry explained.

“Yeah, they’re really cool” Aang enthused at the same time, as he explained what his tattoos were and how they traced his body.

“And you have a sixth one? But no one ever told you what to do with it?” Toph snickered.

“Well…monk Gyatso always said that when I was old enough for the spring festivals, the sixth arrow would be my guide. He said it needed to find union with its opposite, and from there would spring new life.”
“Do you know what that means?”

“Um…I think so?” Aang admitted.

“Alright, let’s back up. Do you know what sort of changes one goes through when they transition from child to grownup?”

“Yeah. You grow a beard, and your sixth arrow gets hairy.”

Aang’s words set Toph laughing again, much to Aang’s angry dismay. Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing himself. He could see the kid was getting embarrassed and frustrated, and he didn’t want to make it worse.

“Toph, you’re really not helping. Aang, we’ll pick this up another time, alright?”

Aang nodded, still embarrassed.

“Sorry, sorry…couldn’t help myself.” Toph snickered. “I’m not trying to give you a hard time, Twinkletoes, it just sounded funny how you phrased it.”

“Look, all I was trying to say is that you…both of you, actually—you’re about the same age, right?”

“I’m a hundred and twelve. She’s just twelve.”

“Physically, you’re twelve, which is what we’re talking about—physical development and maturation. If either one of you has started going through that process, well, you’re in the earliest stages of it. Katara is what, two years older than both of you? She’s a lot further along that process. Not too put too fine a point on it, but you’re a child still, and she’s well on her way to being a woman already. She does care about you, Aang, never doubt that…but what you don’t seem to realize is that, well…”

“She’s been acting like your mom, Twinkletoes. She’s been treating you as a child that needs looking after. I seriously doubt it ever crossed her mind to look at you as possible boyfriend material. Pretty-boy and Hotpants though… Sorry. I know it’s not what you want to hear.” Toph concluded.

“She’s the one though! She’s my forever girl!” Aang repeated stubbornly.

“Aang, I’m not doubting your feelings, but…well…how many girls do you actually know? You know Katara, you know Toph…”

“The girls from Kyoshi island…Yue.”

Harry and Aang both sighed sadly, remembering the northern princess.

“That would be moon girl?”

“Yeah.” Harry agreed. “So, in other words—not many, right?” he added to Aang. “Not many, and out of all of them, I have to say that the chances of a relationship with most of them are pretty slim.”

“You make it sound like there’s something wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, it’s just that, well…you and Katara are likely looking for very different things right now.”

“I won’t be twelve forever.”
“And she won’t be fourteen.” Toph reminded him.

“But when we’re a little older, two years won’t be such a big deal.”

“No, it won’t... though if she’s been playing mommy to you in all the intervening years, well, even when the age gap is no longer such a big deal, it kinda still will be.” Toph corrected him.

Aang’s face began twisting up into a stubborn pout.

“Okay… let’s say she remains single and unattached until she’s twenty or so and you’re eighteen… what then?”

“Um, well, we’ll be together.”

“She’s never going to stand for you getting her pregnant and dumping her at the western air temple while you go live at one of the others. She’s probably going to want to live at the south pole with her family and the rest of her tribe. If you live there with her, well... you and Appa are both going to have a rather difficult time of it, I think. There’s simply not enough vegetation down there to support an all vegetarian diet for you, let alone Appa or Momo. More than even that, well... life down there is not going to be at all easy for you. Tribes work on all the members contributing to the good of the group; for the men of the tribe—which would be you—that means hunting, fishing, and being a warrior.”

Aang frowned and opened his mouth to argue. “I don’t eat meat, I don’t hunt, and I don’t kill.”

“They do. I’m thinking that’s kind of the point, Twinkletoes.”

“So... we won’t live there.”

“Katara will probably expect to.”

“She likes being away from the south pole and having adventures!”

“Now, sure. There’s a war on, you need help, she wants to help, her father is here and so is her brother. Right now, travelling around is great. I doubt that’s going to be the case when she wants to settle down and start having children... and when that happens, I can tell you right now she’ll expect her husband to be there, with her, all the time, working and acting like a mature, responsible man of the tribe and contributing to the group.”

“That means hunting, fishing and being a warrior, Twinkletoes.”

“She’s right. We’ve had this conversation about realities of life at the poles before. If you lived there with her full time, like she’d expect, you would pretty much have to live as they do to survive there. You wouldn’t really have a choice.”

Aang made a face and Harry could tell he didn’t really believe him. He was probably picturing life with Katara as an endless adventure, travelling the world, where neither of them ever got older or changed, or wanted different things.

“You’re twelve, Aang. Why are you in such a rush?”

“I’m not in a rush.”

“You’re talking about forever with a girl who isn’t your girlfriend, who may not even be a compatible life partner. Again, what’s the rush?”
“I love her!”

“She was the first person you saw after you woke up, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah, what does that have to do with anything?”

“She was the first person you saw, and you became friends…and then you discovered that the whole world had changed, and everything you knew was gone…and she’s been right there, to tell you it will be better. I imagine that had a pretty serious impact on how you viewed her.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Have it your way. You should eat. We’re going to be busy tomorrow.”

“I’m not really hungry.”

“You should eat anyway.”

“I’m just going to go to sleep.”

“More for me.” Toph quipped, while pulling Aang’s bowl and bread towards herself. Aang glowered at her half-heartedly, before slumping out of the room looking quite depressed.

Toph made quick work of Aang’s supper while Harry went outside to put up some basic security to foil discovery and let him know if anyone was creeping around. When he re-entered the tent, it was to the sound of Toph belching with gusto and patting her now quite full stomach.

“That was good.”

“Thanks, though I didn’t make it. It figures though that I serve the only pre-made vegetarian soup I have on hand on the night Aang decides not to eat.”

“His loss. I know he’s upset and all, but he really shouldn’t let it interfere with his appetite like that. Poor kid. I should have a talk with Sugar queen about reigning in her hormones.”

“Don’t be too hard on her. You met her village. For the last two years it’s been her, Sokka and all of them. There weren’t any boys around to have crushes on, just an endless line of chores and being responsible. She’s close to marrying age, but there was little hope of her every getting married and being a fully adult woman of the tribe—she had all the responsibilities, and none of the perks. She’s making the most of her opportunities while she has the chance. Yeah, the timing is rather inconvenient, but I can’t really blame her. Sokka’s been doing pretty much the same thing, and for the same reasons. Suki on Kyoshi island, Yue at the north pole.”

Toph’s face tightened for just a moment.

“Why haven’t you been? You’re closer to their age than you are to me and Aang.”

“I don’t come of age among my people until I’m seventeen, for one. I’m not from this world, so it would be kind of pointless to fall for someone here, would be a second reason. Third, I was rather like you in that I was being stifled, though in the opposite way you were. I was trapped by fame, you were trapped by obscurity. I came here looking for adventure and freedom. I am in no way looking to settle down, get married or start planning for babies.”

“I hear ya, though I’m still a bit surprised. You can’t really help who you crush on. I think you’re the only boy I’ve met since we’ve all been travelling together that doesn’t seem to be panting after Sugar queen.”
“Well, like I said, I’m not from this world, also, I have no desire to live at either of the poles. It’s cold and snowy a lot of the year where I’m from, but it’s got nothing on the poles. Beyond that, Katara reminds me of a girl back home who’s been trying to control me and be my mother since the day I met her. I had a mother, she died a long time ago, but I’m not looking for a replacement. I’m rather independent, and all the fussing kind of gets to me.”

“Sheesh, tell me about it. She’s always ‘what are you doing? Where are you going? Why aren’t you helping?’”

“It’s how she shows she cares. Don’t take it personally.”

Toph rolled her eyes and then subsided into pensive silence.

“Sokka’s probably going to want to return to the south pole, isn’t he?” she asked after a while, her voice deceptively casual.

“Yeah. He’s enjoying the adventure, seeing new places and meeting new people, but yeah. He misses his home, and he’s really looking forward to being able to return there someday.”

“I can’t see on ice.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Toph sighed and smiled self-deprecatingly. “At least he never tried acting like my dad. I guess I should be happy with small favors.”

They shared a laugh, then Harry fetched her some blankets. She made herself a nest amidst the pillows and curled up to go to sleep.

He entered the bedroom quietly and found Aang curled up in a miserable little ball in one corner of the futon. Faint tear tracks could be seen on his face by the moonlight coming through the window. He covered him with a blanket and then settled in on the other side to get some sleep himself.

Harry heaved the last of the bundles rising out of the ground into his tent, and then nodded to Toph when she followed.

“Is that all of them? I sure hope so; my poor tent is straining at the seams.”

“Yeah, that’s all of them. Sugar queen does good work when she keeps her mind on the job and off her sixth arrow.”

She grinned when Harry snorted.

“Is the distraction still in progress?”

“Yep.”

“I take it you’re going to pitch in?”

“You know it.”

“Alright, I’ll get this stuff to the riverside. I guess I’ll see you back at the village later.”
“Can do.”

They parted way—Toph to bust some heads, Harry to hide the belongings of the soon-to-be refugees.

There was a celebration in progress when he returned to the treetop village. Fate had helped make their ‘distraction’ easier and more worthwhile. The guards from the town had gone to meet up with a supply shipment coming in—a necessary precaution as so many of their supplies seemed to disappear en route due to the intervention of the freedom fighters. They had not only gotten to bust some heads, they’d been able to add to their own dwindling supplies while doing so.

Everyone was in high spirits, recounting their own tales of bravery, and acting out their separate battles against their foes, each to loud acclaim from their fellows, while munching on stolen army food and squirrel kebobs. Everyone was excited about the upcoming battle, where they would finally manage the task they’d been aiming towards for months—freeing Gaipan from Fire Nation.

“What’s up with you?”

Toph smiled and shrugged. “I was just thinking, this is a place I could have been happy, if only it wasn’t so far from the ground. Usually, I don’t mind being blind, and it really doesn’t stop me…”

“But at times like this it starts feeling like a handicap. I can understand that.” Harry agreed sympathetically. “Hmmm…you know…I might be able to do something about that. I don’t know if it will actually work, so I don’t want to get your hopes up.”

“If you’re going to try to cure my blindness, don’t bother. My parents have had me poked and prodded by every healer, shaman and quack they could lay hands on—which was a lot, because they’re really rich. I was born blind. There’s nothing there to fix. Whatever is wrong has been wrong from the beginning.”

“That isn’t what I was thinking. I was thinking maybe we could extend your earth-sense, but I don’t know if it will work the way I’m thinking. I can try. If it doesn’t work, well, you’re no worse off than you were, but if it works even a little, it might let you see just enough that you won’t be completely blind when your feet aren’t touching the ground…but like I said, I don’t know if it will actually work that way. Let me work on it, alright. I’ll get back to you on it.”

“Alright, though you shouldn’t get your hopes up either. Like I said, I’ve always been this way.”

“Fair enough.” He agreed.

He noticed Aang was staring intently across the length of the platform they were all gathered on, with a surly look on his face, and followed his line of sight to see a swaggering Jet and a giddy Katara sneaking off towards one of the other platforms for a bit of alone time.

Toph turned sightless eyes his way, her face creased in curiosity.

“What’s with you? I can feel your blood pounding and hear you huffing and puffing…let me guess; Hotpants and Sugar queen?”
“Sneaking off together by the look of it.” Harry agreed.

Aang’s eyes narrowed and made to rise, but Harry grabbed him by the back of the shirt, and Toph helpfully knocked his feet out from under him so he had no choice but to sit back down. Once he was down, they both scooched closer so he was pinned between them.

“Let me go.” He hissed angrily.

“Why? What were you going to do beside end up feeling worse?” Toph asked.

“I hate to say it man, but I have to agree with the lady. You can see as well as I can that they’re sneaking off for some smooch time. What were you going to do? Bust into the middle and demand he get his hands off your woman? I can tell you right now, that wouldn’t have gone over well at all.” Harry agreed.

“Understatement. It would be a nightmare!” Toph hissed. “Do you really want Hotpants to pity you?”

“Katara would probably be mortified, and really uncomfortable, especially if she has you firmly in the category of ‘pseudo-son’ or ‘little brother’.”

“Not to mention, they’re probably smooching right now. You know it’s probably happening…do you really want to see it?”

“Hey!” Sokka said, slightly suspicious. “What do you three have your heads together about over here? You better not be planning a prank on me.”

“Darn. Caught us.” Toph snickered quite believably.

Sokka still looked suspicious, but he let it drop and looked around.

“Say, where’s Katara at?”

“Where do you think?” Toph scoffed, while Aang slumped in place as his earlier anger drained out of him and was replaced once more with crushing depression.

“Hey…what’s with you, little guy?” Sokka asked, sounding concerned.

Aang lifted his drooping head and stared at him, hurt by this further evidence that Harry and Toph were right when they told him he hadn’t even been in the running. Katara was running off with every boy that wasn’t him that crossed her path, and didn’t seem to consider that it might bother him in any way. Sokka, seeing him depressed at the reminder that Katara was running off with every boy who wasn’t him that crossed her path, seemed honestly confused. It really, honestly didn’t seem to have occurred to him that his depression was in any way related to Katara.

It was all true.

They thought he was a baby, a little boy who needed taking care of.

Yeah, he was still kind of a kid, but jeez.

“It’s nothing.” Was all he said. “Hey, we gonna head off and make camp now?”

“The tent’s already set up by Appa, we just need to go there.”

“Let’s go then. I’m kinda tired.”
“Okaaaay.” Sokka agreed, still looking suspicious, not to mention a little hurt by their stonewalling. “Let me get Katara and we’ll head out. I don’t care what she says this time. I didn’t sleep well up here last night, and I know gran-gran would have something to say about the whole thing…not to mention dad. Did you see which way she went?”

All three of them pointed to the left where the couple had disappeared.

“All three of them pointed to the left where the couple had disappeared.

“Okay…I guess I’ll go get her then.”
“We’ll be here.”

Toph waited till Sokka was out of earshot.

“Twinkletoes, a word of advice. Before anything else, Sugar queen’s your friend, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Friends are happy for their friend’s happiness.”

“Stiffen up your pride, Aang, and smile like you mean it.” Harry agreed.

“The monks always told us pride was an illusion that we needed to let go of.”

“Pride can be a bad thing…but sometimes, it’s the only thing that keeps you standing upright when all you want to do is crawl away. Stiffen up your pride, and remember Katara is your friend, and you love her…just as she loves you—even if it’s not quite in the way you want.”

They could hear Sokka and Katara coming, so Harry stood and unrolled the carpet. He got on first, and Toph steered Aang to sit behind him, with herself behind him to act as a buffer.

Katara was glowing—partly from embarrassment at having her brother barge into the middle of a private moment, partly from giddy excitement.

Aang’s shoulders quivered just a bit, and he averted his face from the sight, but otherwise held his peace. After the siblings climbed on board, Harry got them moving.

Unseen by the others, Toph lightly patted Aang’s lower back in a show of support. He grasped her ankle in return, as it was right in reach. She could feel his hand trembling, so she kept her wisecracks to herself for once.
Decisions and Realizations

Chapter Summary

Zuko trains and considers his next move, Harry and the gaang decide to take a brief vacation. Princess Azula does some navel gazing to show up her brother.

“Well done, nephew. If you keep up your progress at this rate, we should be done the advanced forms in no time!” Iroh said with pride.

“You think so?”

“Yes. You are finally listening to my instructions, and you have managed to stay in the moment and stop thinking so much. I’m sure you can feel the difference yourself.”

“I can.” Zuko agreed. “Everything’s been going so easy all of a sudden…I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“That is understandable, with all your troubles in the past, but do not allow your past troubles to continue impeding your progress.”

“Easier said than done, but I’ll try.”

He took a deep breath and let it out and then began stretching to cool down from his workout.

“We should be at the northern air temple soon. I hope we can pick up their trail again from there.”

“What makes you so certain they were there?”

“It’s close by the north pole, relatively speaking. It seemed logical. There’s a couple of bases up this way somewhere as well. Maybe we can get news on further sightings if they’re not there.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope they’re not. I doubt any of us fancies being stranded at another air temple, not to mention we can ill-afford to lose this ship after the recent naval disaster. Plus, we have to keep in mind that rescue will not be so easily come by this time—we have only a fraction of our navy left, and the northern earth kingdom coastline has never been a priority even so.”

“I’ll have to remember to remind the men to be wary. I don’t know if any of them are familiar with these northern waters…and the air. I have to wonder how the air nomads lived up here for so long without blowing themselves up. I mean, they had to use fire once in a while, right?”

“Blowing themselves up?” Lieutenant Jee asked curiously as he approached.

“Natural gas pockets. They’re all over up in those mountains. Some of it seeps out underground into the water and freezes. You’ll have to warn the men to be wary of throwing around fire while we’re up here, and to chip away ice on the anchor, not melt it.” Iroh explained.

“I’ll make a note of it.”

“Was there something else, Lieutenant?”
“Yeah, the base is gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“The base up ahead. It just came in sight of the watchtower. It’s been destroyed. The factories and other buildings look like they’ve been torn apart by blasting jelly or burned down.”

“How long till we arrive?”

“About an hour.”

“I want to take a look. We’d best know what we’re in for.”

“Has anyone done a head count?”

“I gave the list to Madame Wen, she was my contact in the town. She says we have everyone.” Katara answered.

“Good, good.” Harry replied, while he watched the refugees from Gaipan sorting out the piles of belongings he’d left by the riverside while men from the water tribe sorted out who was going on what boat to be transported to Ba Sing Se.

“Everything worked, just as planned.” Hakoda said, pleased.

“It did, but it did seem needlessly complicated.”

“We did much the same thing at the base near the mountains.” Hakoda reminded him.

“Yeah, but the plan depended on warriors last time—this time, on frightened women and children. I had a heck of a time convincing them there weren’t any actual monsters in the mist, and that it was just a trick to get them out unseen. Thankfully, none of them bolted, but it was a very near thing.”

“Something to keep in mind if we ever do this again.” Hakoda agreed. “So, tell me about these… freedom fighters.”

“They’re all orphans, though a couple just discovered their fathers were actually still alive among the miners—only two of them though. Now that Gaipan has been ‘liberated’, and by that, I mean destroyed, most of the younger kids, the non-fighters at least, are going to go with the refugees to Ba Sing Se, that leaves the six actual freedom fighters—Longshot, Smellerbee, Pipsqueak, Sneers, the Duke, and their leader Jet. They could probably be of great use to the earth army as scouts. They’re sneaky, and they already have a whole system of birdcalls to communicate with each other.”

“They’re all so young—too young to go to war.”

“Life doesn’t always give you a choice in the matter. When their worlds imploded, they all chose to stand and fight, not just let themselves be victims…and with the exception of the Duke, they’re mostly of an age with myself and your daughter, and older than Toph or the Avatar, while Jet is of an age with your son. Katara could tell you more about him than I could though. They’ve become quite... close.”

Hakoda raised an eyebrow and shot a look at his daughter, who was red-faced and glaring at Harry.

“Oh?”
Harry pretended to be looking past Katara’s shoulder, while blithely ignoring her glare.

“Oh, I say, isn’t that Haru? Gosh, this could be awkward…”

Katara’s eyes widened in panic and she spun around to scan the bank of the river.

Hakoda sighed and rubbed at his stomach as he was seized with a sudden bout of indigestion. When he left home two years ago, his daughter was still a little girl. He wasn’t ready for this.

“Where…”

“Oh, my mistake, seems my glasses just needed cleaning.”

“Why you!”

Hakoda snagged the back of Katara’s dress before she had a chance to run off and chase the boy, who had darted away cackling. At least any concerns he had on that front had been laid to rest—he might be a spirit, but he was a spirit in the guise of a teenage boy—but no, he seemed to have adopted his children as siblings, nothing more, given the whole display he’d just witnessed, and the boy’s utter glee at embarrassing his daughter.

Katara settled down and gave him a look that was equal parts pleading, embarrassed and defiant.

No, he really wasn’t ready for this.

“So…Jet, huh? You should introduce me to this boy.”

Ready or not, it needed dealing with. That’s when an awful, terrible thought occurred to him. Katara eyed him curiously as his face blanched.

“Oh…did your grandmother have a talk with you about… things?”

“Things?” Katara repeated. Her eyes then widened and a blush that was equal parts embarrassment and annoyance crossed her face.

“I’ve helped deliver babies, dad. I know all about things. I’m not a child.”

“I know. That’s part of the problem.” He muttered under his breath.

His daughter wasn’t listening to him. She was watching the approach of a youngster with some sort of grass stalk sticking out of the corner of his mouth—a cocky, swaggering youngster with a grin that bespoke trouble, who eyed his daughter with a proprietary air that got his hackles up.

Please, no. The spirits couldn’t be so cruel, could they?

“Jet! Um, I’d like you to meet my father, Chief Hakoda. Dad, this is Jet.”

Apparently, they could.

“This is a disaster.” Zuko whispered, horrified.

“It is not good, but I think you overstate the case.” Iroh replied.
“First the factories and now this.”

“It seems your guess was a good one.”

“I wish I’d been mistaken. My father was right. The avatar is Fire Nation’s greatest enemy.”

“We are at war, Prince Zuko, and from what the men back at the base said, war minister Qin installed an earth kingdom weapons designer in this air temple. My guess is that the avatar didn’t do most of this” Iroh waved a hand to indicate the mass of burned soldiers. “Were we not just speaking of pockets of natural gas in these mountains a few hours ago? From the look of it, the avatar simply removed the road and left the soldiers no way to access the temple.”

“What about the base?”

“A mostly empty, much damaged Fire Nation ship pulled in just before the attack. My guess is that was water tribe people, and they emptied the boat of warriors before pulling into sight of the base; a clever ruse, but again, not the work of the avatar. No, prince Zuko, removing the avatar from the field would destroy the hopes of some, but we would still have a world full of enemies to face. The Southern water tribe took the field two years ago, after decades of raids and the loss of all their waterbenders. The Northern Water tribe has kept to their own territories these many years, until now it seems, because Admiral Zhao brought the might of an entire fleet against them. They won a great victory against us, with the help of the spirits, and now are seeking vengeance for those of their people who fell during the siege. Earth Kingdom has been our implacable enemy for many decades now already, long before the avatar reappeared, and they will continue to be even if he is gone again.”

“There wasn’t this much resistance until he reappeared.”

“We were fighting a cleaner, saner war before he did.”

Zuko took one last look around at the blackened ground, the broken tanks that littered it and the soldiers who had died there and turned away.

“If they traveled here from the north pole and then to the base they’re either heading southeast towards Chameleon Bay, or west towards Pohai stronghold. We should be able to pick up their trail again without too much trouble.”

“And what will you do with the avatar when you find him again?”

Zuko sighed. “I wish I knew. I had him in my grasp once, and couldn’t hold him. I caught up to him a second time and couldn’t catch him, even with a small squad of soldiers along to distract his companions. He’s an air nomad…keeping him from his element is going to be nigh on impossible, and that’s without adding in that he might already have mastered waterbending, and be well on his way to mastering earth…but if we kill him, he’ll just be reborn into the water tribes, who are already out for our blood…and who we’ve already tried to wipe out, quite unsuccessfully…”

“The world is already greatly out of balance due to the massacre of the air nomads, nephew. Compounding our country’s crimes by wiping out one or both of the remaining peoples is not the way to a happy and successful life.”

“I never said I wanted to do either, uncle.”
“Then perhaps you should consider what you do want to do, nephew.”

“What can I do but continue chasing him?”

Iroh hesitated.

“What?”

“It was a passing thought, nephew, nothing more.”

“If you have something to say, say it.”

Iroh studied his nephew a moment and shook his head. “It was a passing thought.” He repeated. “I will say only this, my nephew—perhaps you should consider what options you may have, other than chasing him…you must also consider what you will do should you catch him. You cannot simply keep running from place to place and hope something occurs to you later. You said, before we left the eastern air temple that you did not know where your destiny lay. Maybe you really should think about all of that before events overtake us once more.”

“Hey, Longshot, could I talk to you a moment?” Harry asked.

The young freedom fighter eyed him suspiciously for a moment, as did his friends, and then nodded and moved to follow him.

“Longshot doesn’t talk though.” He could hear the Duke stage whisper behind them.

He glanced at Longshot to see what he thought of the Duke’s pronouncement, but he looked as inscrutable as ever. Harry walked until they were out of earshot of everyone, but not out of view—Smellerbee in particular was looking irritable, but none of the freedom fighters looked particularly happy about anyone wanting to get one of them alone; he wasn’t going to compound their worry by taking him out of eyesight.

Once he had Longshot alone, he wondered how even to broach the subject he wanted to address. He decided blunt was probably best.

“Were you aware you’re an airbender?”

Longshot’s eyes narrowed slightly and one eyebrow went up.

“Dumb question, I take it? I’m not a bender myself, so I didn’t know if you could feel it or whatever.”

The eyebrow went down and the eyes went back to normal.

“So you know then. Is it alright if I tell Aang? I don’t know how much you know about his story…”

A slight head tilt towards Katara answered that.

“Ah. So you know then…a hundred years passed in what seemed to him to be overnight. He thought he was the only one.”

The corners of Longshot’s mouth turned down slightly, and his eyes darted to look at Smellerbee for just a moment, as his hands tightened just a bit on his bow.
“He’s not going to force you to be a monk if you don’t want to. I’ve actually already addressed that with him, and he agreed that many folks might not be cut out for it. He probably will want you to come to the temple for training though.”

His brow furrowed, his eyebrows slanted down and he tapped his bow twice on the ground.

“Well, obviously it would be after the war.”

Another brief flicker of a glance towards Smellerbee.

“They’re all empty—it’s not like there wouldn’t be room for her to come too.”

A brief flick of a finger.

“I realize she’s not, but even so, there’s no reason she couldn’t come along…and before you ask, Katara was at one, one that used to be strictly male-only. I trained Aang and Katara to be waterbenders there. He knows things won’t be like they used to…and honestly, I think he’d be happy of the extra company…not to mention the possibility of baby airbenders someday.”

A faint blush, and the tiniest quirk of an embarrassed smile.

He stood lost in thought for several minutes, and then looked at him, his eyes inquisitive.

“I’m a sensor.” He didn’t need the cocked eyebrow to know he needed to explain further.

“I can feel people’s chi. Benders have a certain feel to them that’s different from non-benders. For a long time, Katara was the only waterbender I’d met, so I didn’t know at first if how she felt was just her or if it was something that would be common to all waterbenders. I got my answer at the north pole. It was the same with Toph, until I met more earthbenders. I was able to extrapolate from that what I thought another airbender would feel like based on how Aang does. You’re the first I’ve come across”

A faint flash of disappointment crossed the other boy’s eyes, there and gone so quickly he nearly missed it.

“But now, having met you, I’m more confident that there are others. I didn’t want to broach the possibility before and get Aang’s hopes up—that would have been cruel.”

A faintly downturned mouth and a barely-there nod said Longshot agreed.

“You’re untrained, and I’m guessing you’ve been hiding it as best you could”

Another faint nod.

“I just about missed it. I wasn’t actually sure until I stood practically on top of you, and even then I was uncertain.”

Longshot looked pensive for a moment, then straightened and gave a nod.

Harry gave him a brilliant smile in return, before calling out.

“Hey, Aang! Come here a moment, would you?”

“Why is the bald kid hugging Longshot?” Pipsqueak wondered.
“And why is he crying?”

“I think a better question is why is Longshot hugging him back?”

“He’s pointing over here. Why is he pointing over here? He’s not telling the bald kid to come hug us, is he?” the Duke asked.

“He better not be.” Smellerbee grumbled, while crossing her arms defensively.

“The bald kid is dancing around now.”

“So he is.”

“And now he’s hugging the other kid. He’s an excitable fellow, isn’t he?”

“What’s everyone staring at?”

The rest of the freedom fighters turned to glance at Jet, Katara and Hakoda, who had come to join them. As one they pointed to the three boys a short distance away and explained what had caught their interest.

“How odd. Aang can be excitable, but he doesn’t just go around hugging people for no reason.”

“Quiet. Longshot’s coming back.”

The quiet archer rejoined them, still looking inscrutable.

“So, Longshot, what’s up?” Jet asked.

Longshot tapped his bow and made a vague gesture towards Aang.

“What? No way!” The freedom fighters all shouted at once, while Katara and Hakoda looked mystified.

“How’d that even happen, man?”

Longshot pursed his lips.

“Great-granny huh? And it passed down?”

Longshot nodded and retook his seat beside Smellerbee.

“Huh. Imagine that.”

Hakoda and Katara exchanged another mystified glance.

Sokka wandered by Harry and Aang, and then came over and joined them. He stared at Longshot for a long moment.

“So…you’re really an airbender?”

“He’s what?!” Hakoda and Katara both shouted.

Smellerbee gave them both an irritated look. “What’s with you two? Didn’t we just go over all this?”
“Sir, water tribe ships heading south.”

Zuko scanned the water but could only see a distant smudge that might have been ships on the horizon, but could just as easily been nothing, before glancing up at the watchtower.

“Are we in their sights?”

“It doesn’t look like it sir. They haven’t changed course to intercept.”

“Keep me informed if there’s any change.”

“Yes sir.”

“It seems your instincts were correct again, as were mine. Water tribe destroyed the base, possibly with assistance from Earth Kingdom. The avatar and his group, if they were with them, seem to have headed west towards Pohai stronghold. What shall we do now, prince Zuko?”

“Follow and listen.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know, uncle, alright? I just don’t know.” Zuko snapped, before sighing and clenching at the rail nearest to himself. “I’m not a traitor.” He whispered, almost too low for Iroh to catch.

Iroh debated pushing the issue, but in the end decided he’d best retreat for the moment. His nephew was loyal to their country and their people if nothing else. Convincing him that a move that would be viewed as treachery might actually be the best course would be tricky at the very least. He knew too well how stubborn the boy could be; if he pushed too hard too soon, Zuko might well dig in his heels for no better reason than that he could. No, better by far to retreat to nudge another day.

“Alright gang, we’ve stolen Fire Nation’s weapons designer, helped destroy two bases, freed numerous earthbenders and assorted Earth Kingdom prisoners, and aided in destroying an outpost. What do we do next?”

“Mini vacation?” Aang said hopefully.

“Your opinion, Sifu Toph?” Harry asked the blind girl.

Toph crossed her arms and paced while she considered.

“Alright”

Aang cheered.

“But only”

Aang slumped.

“if you can show me you’ve made some progress with sensing the earth.”
“I’m getting better…I’m still not as good as you are.” Aang sighed.

“Of course not! I’m the greatest earthbender you’ll ever meet!” Toph scoffed, before standing proudly and indulging in a long, loud cackle of triumph. The rest of them tuned it out—it was something of a recurring thing since Toph had joined them.

When she finished, Aang stared at her attentively.

“Show me progress, and I’ll okay the mini vacation. Get your blindfold on, Twinkletoes, and show me what you’ve got…no, even better, show me and Sugar queen what you’ve got. We haven’t done that yet, water and earth while blindfolded.”

Aang pouted at her, but she was implacable.

“You want a mini vacation? Show me progress!”

“Yes, sifu Toph” Aang sighed.

“That’s what I like to hear! Well, come on, time is wasting, Twinkletoes!”

They had retreated upriver, into the mountains, while the refugees were being transported south. They had found a nice field with boulders and a nearby source of water that Katara and Toph both agreed would be good for their needs. While Aang was getting his blindfold on, Harry, Sokka, Appa, Hedwig and Momo all retreated a distance away, finding a bit of higher ground to rest upon so they would both be out of the way and have a good view of the proceedings.

Aang stretched and got his muscles loose, before settling into a ready stance, while Toph and Katara each went to their own end of the field—Toph nearest the boulders, Katara nearest the water.

This would be their first time sparring since Katara’s relationship with Jet (and Haru) came to light. Harry could admit he was very interested to see how it would go. Would he do badly because he was too distracted by Katara and his broken heart…or would he be uncommonly aggressive and take the fight to them for once? He really didn’t know.

Katara swayed and pulled a long tube of water from the stream, which she immediately sent whipping towards Aang. Normally he would avoid such a blow or disperse it. This time, he pulled half the water away and sent it snapping back, while dispersing the rest and then spun away from the path of a pillar of rock that burst out from what would have been right beneath him, and knocked a chunk off the top and sent it back towards Toph. Katara avoided the whip sent her way, though she looked a little disgruntled that Aang was working offensively against her—it wasn’t something that had ever happened before. Toph, on the other hand, was delighted.

“That’s the stuff, Twinkletoes! Get ready to rumble!”

Katara formed a tube of water on each arm, like long tentacles and sent them both whipping towards Aang, while Toph tried fouling his footing. He danced among the grasping, surging earth beneath and ducked and weaved through the flailing tentacles, while calling to the water to surge up in a wave behind Katara and land on her. She sensed the water coming, but wasn’t expecting the wave to be as wide or as tall as it was, so she still got soaked. Then, the now-muddy water then surged back up off the ground and knocked her backwards into the stream, she squawked in outrage. Toph cackled delightedly and knocked up the pressure, sending the ground surging while knocking different sized boulders towards him. He tossed some of them back, smashed others, and then spun back towards Katara to raise a curved shelter to block the wave she’d just sent after him. He stomped
the ground and sent a ripple towards her that ended in a jutting, flat-topped spike, which sent her back into the stream, and then picked up a tube of water and sent it hurtling towards Toph. She managed to block most of it, though she still got wet.

“Oho, playing dirty, Twinkletoes! Good job!”

“Good job? Look at me!” Katara huffed as she climbed out of the stream.

Harry and Sokka had made their way down from their viewing spot, and arrived in time to hear Katara’s complaint.

Sokka smacked Aang in the back of the head.

“OW! What was that for?”

“What the hell man, what did you do that to Katara for?”

Harry smacked Sokka in the back of the head.

“OW! What was that for?”

“Did you miss the part where it was a two on one-who-is-blindfolded sparring practice?” Harry demanded. “Don’t listen to him Aang, you did great.”

“Great? Great? Look at me!”

“He did you a favor.” Harry growled.

“Excuse me?” Katara snarled back as she wrung out her hair.

“Pipe down, Sugar queen. You’re the only one of the three of us who had the use of their eyes for this thing, and Aang was fighting two on one. You got your ass handed to you. Admit it and move on.”

“We were supposed to be testing Aang!”

“And he passed, with flying colors. You on the other hand… Harry’s right. Aang did you a favor going offensive on you; you expect him to just take whatever you dish out and not dare fight back as well as he could! Make up your mind—if you’re a warrior, take your lumps and deal. If you’re not, then get the hell off the battlefield.” Toph scoffed.

“I don’t recall asking your opinion!”

“Well I’m making it my business!”

“Stay out of it! This is between me and Aang!”

“She’s right.” Harry interjected. “You need to suck it up. You weren’t hurt, you just got wet. Expecting him to fight with a handicap is going to cripple his training, and yours for that matter. Aang was blindfolded and getting hammered from both sides, so he wasn’t able to use his normal delicacy when dealing with you. I will not have you making Aang feel bad about doing well. In case you’ve forgotten, he needs to save the world.”

“What is this, everyone pick on Katara day?” Sokka demanded.

“Why are you taking her side?”
“She’s my sister!”

“And she’s wrong. Do you want her getting killed the next time we’re in an actual battle because she’s been having a hissy fit about people actually going after her in a spar, and so doesn’t know how to deal with people working offensively against her? Do you want Aang to get himself killed because he learns to hold back and not go all-out against someone attacking him?” Toph demanded.

While everyone had been arguing, Aang had stood quietly off to the side, blindfold in hand, and just listened.

“So, Katara, what you seem to be saying is…if you got after me with water dragons that bite, freeze me in ice blocks, hammer me with chunks of ice that leave cuts and bruises, it’s all right and good and proper…but if I get you wet, I’m evil or something?”

“What? No…I never said that!”

“You kinda did. Toph’s right. Get over it.”

Aang turned and started back towards camp. Katara sputtered in outrage.

“Get back here young man and apologize right now. I will not put up with this sort of attitude.”

Aang glanced back and kept walking.

“You’re not my mother, and I have nothing to apologize for.”

Katara looked confused and bereft as the three of them left. She wasn’t used to Aang fighting her, or arguing with her, or taking anyone’s side against her. She certainly wasn’t used to him standing his ground when she let him know she was upset about something.

Sokka waited till everyone was out of earshot before confronting her.

“They’re right, you know. You’re making a big deal out of nothing. Aang was kicking ass; you should be proud of him.”

“It’s fine if he’s doing it to someone else! Why are you taking their side? I thought you were with me!”

“While they’re in your face, yelling at you, sure” he agreed “but they’re not here now, and you’re being a brat. I feel it’s my duty as your elder brother to tell you this.”

Katara scowled and called a small wave to drop on him before stalking off.

When Sokka got back to camp, he found Katara sitting on one side of the fire, arms crossed and looking a bit lost, while Aang, Toph and Harry sat on the other side, making plans.

“Okay, so we’ve got Omashu for Toph so she can test herself against Bumi, I want to see the musical prairie dogs, Harry, how about you?”

“Hmmm…I don’t know. I’ll think of something.”

“Sokka, how about you?”

“Well…I’d like to know how Suki is doing.”
“You could send her a letter, you know.”

“That’s true, isn’t it?”

“It might not be a bad idea to feel out the situation before we drop in on her. She might be pissy that we brought the Fire Nation navy down on her head.”

“That’s a good point. All right, I’ll hold a visit to Kyoshi island in reserve depending on how she answers my letter, how’s that?”

“Sounds doable. Katara, how about you?” Harry asked.

Katara glanced at Aang, but he was busy chatting with Toph about Bumi and trying to convince her that she really wanted to ride the Omashu rail system. She frowned, rather mystified by the continued cold shoulder. “Um, well… I saw a place advertised while we were in Gaoling called the ‘Misty Palms Oasis’. It sounded interesting. It’s in the desert, but they’re supposed to have a glacier.”

“Oh, I was there before. It was a really cool place, one of nature’s wonders.” Aang spoke up.

“Okay then, we have a bending battle, musical gophers, an iceberg in the desert, a possible stop at Kyoshi island, and I’ll hold mine in reserve until I think of something interesting.”

“Where to first?”

“Omashu!” Toph shouted.

“Any objections?”

“It’s fine with me.” Katara sighed disconsolately.

“All right, Omashu it is.”

Her hands twitched just the tiniest bit when she entered the throne room and saw her father’s shadowed form among the sea of fire; it reminded her too much of her strange, inexplicable last meeting with her brother. She’d been surprised, to say the least—who knew Zuzu had it in him? She certainly hadn’t.

The flames jumped a few inches higher, so she gracefully knelt and kowtowed, while cursing herself internally for allowing her mind to wander, even if just for a moment. She held her position as the seconds ticked by, and kept herself relaxed and submissive, giving no sign of her unease at the silence, or how the stone floor was digging into her knees. She put all thoughts of her brother and uncle out of her mind.

She knew better than to allow herself to falter in such a way. She’d been cooling her heels since she’d gotten back, waiting for this audience, and she’d ruined it before even beginning! What was wrong with her? She knew better—she’d always known better. Such distraction and unease was an unforgivable weakness, and could not be allowed to continue.

The flames lowered to their more usual height after several agonizing seconds that felt like years. She allowed herself to rise partway from her bow and kneeled, poised and ready; the very image of a
serene, powerful princess.

“Your aunts tell me you’ve been ill.”

He’d been silent so long she nearly twitched when he finally spoke. Thankfully, she was able to control the urge before it manifested.

“I’m fine, father. I’ve just had trouble sleeping the last few days. I’m sure whatever it is will pass.”

“The late admiral Zhao has been stricken from all records and what is left of his clan, a few distant cousins, I believe, have been struck down and their holdings burned.”

“A fitting end for the traitorous rat.” She replied calmly, though she felt a twinge of annoyance deep inside.

Surely her father didn’t really think she’d been in league with the idiot—or worse yet, that she’d had feelings for him. The man had been father’s age or older and he’d looked like a monkey! Bad enough having to take such nonsense from Zuzu—because really, who knew what went through his mind sometimes—but from father as well? Zhao better hope he never crossed her path in the afterlife, that’s all she could say.

“I understand you had a lengthy reunion with your brother while you were gone.”

“I wouldn’t say lengthy, it was an hour at most.”

“An hour in which you left the procession behind.”

“Well, it was just Zuzu.”

“A banished prince, whom you sought out, on foot, like a beggar”

“A banished prince, but still of royal blood.” She replied indifferently. “And he was stranded on an island with a rocky shore. It would have been a nuisance to transport the palanquin on the river trawler, not to mention I didn’t fancy trusting the bearers to not drop me while we made our way up to the temple, given the terrain. It simply seemed more expedient to just go myself.”

“And during your lengthy meeting, you were given information you found disquieting.” Her father continued as though she hadn’t spoken.

“I would have said infuriating… the nameless one was quite open about his ambitions, it seems, and confident enough to taunt Prince Zuko to his face. Such base treachery from one who held favor is unforgivable.”

The interview was interminable, and left her twitchy long after she was dismissed—though naturally she took care not to let it show. Servants were such gossips…and one never did know who was more than a servant.

She kept herself calm and relaxed and went about her day as she usually did. She knew any deviations from schedule would be reported, and would likely result in another lengthy interview like the one she’d just escaped.

Two hours on her knees, while he circled around Zhao, her ‘lengthy’ meeting with Zuko, and her sleeping habits. He hadn’t asked her about anything important—not the naval disaster, not the interviews she’d held with the returning soldiers, nothing.
She went through her usual routine—two hours of study in the library, bending practice, nails touched up, dinner…alone but for Lo and Li her great-aunts/trainers/minders. Finally it was time for bed.

She got changed, brushed out her hair, removed her makeup…and then she just sat there, on her bed, staring at the walls and listening to the silence.

Zuzu had been right; it really was quiet around here anymore.

Ty Lee was often an annoyance, but her bright chatter kept the silence away.

What had she been thinking? Running away to join the circus of all things.

She was a fool—a weak-minded, sentimental fool, and she always had been.

So why was it she had been able to just run off one night without a backwards glance, while she herself was sitting alone in her room thinking about her?

She stood abruptly, angry with herself for her self-indulgence.

She was procrastinating. She hadn’t been sleeping well since she’d begun her own ‘spiritual training’.

It made no sense! She was smarter than Zuzu, more powerful, she was and always had been just better than him in every way that mattered!

So why was she getting ill just thinking about delving back into her training, when Zuzu had breezed through it?

He’d been so different. She used to be able to play him like a tsungi horn. No matter how many times she used them, he always fell for the same tricks—every single time.

You’d think he’d have learned, but no, every time he always seemed to believe she had good intentions, that she wouldn’t lie to him or twist him up in knots.

None of her usual methods of dealing with her brother had worked. He hadn’t risen to the bait a single time. He’d been relaxed, cheerful. He seemed at peace with who he was, probably for the first time since she’d known him….and she had fallen apart the moment they’d met.

She’d been wrongfooted from the moment she decided to march off to the island to give him a piece of her mind, and somehow she’d never quite gotten the upper hand back afterwards.

Still hadn’t, if her recent distraction was any indication.

“I’m being ridiculous.” She snarled. She took a deep breath, held it, and let it out, then got into her meditative position.

“The first chakra is the earth chakra. It runs on survival and is blocked by fear.”

She’d been mediating on the stupid thing for weeks now, and she’d yet to feel any ‘loosening’ or any burst of released energy.

Maybe she was wasting her time? After all, she feared nothing and no one. That must be it. It was already clear and open, that’s why she was having no luck. It was already open, and the excess energy was keeping her up nights.

“Well, that’s a relief. Alright, next one. The water chakra. The water chakra is located in the sacrum. It runs on pleasure and is blocked by guilt.”

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Still hadn’t, if her recent distraction was any indication.
well. Fourth chakra—air. It runs on love and is blocked by grief. Love is for weaklings and I have no
grief...beyond being born second when I’m obviously superior in every way. I can let that go. After
all, I’m the heir apparent, and I am superior in every way. There, that’s another one done. It’s
obvious now. I must have caught some weird airbender disease at that stupid, derelict temple. That’s
why I haven’t been sleeping well. Well...that’s more than half of them already open before I even
really began. No problem. A good day’s work. I can’t believe silly Zuzu needed help to do this.
How funny. It looks like I’m still superior. That’s a relief.”

She rolled up the scroll and set it aside, before climbing into bed, eager for a good night’s rest.

Already tired from a number of sleepless nights, she fell asleep almost as soon as her head hit the
pillow.

She woke less than an hour later, heart pounding. She couldn’t remember her dream, but it was
terrifying, she knew that much.

She huddled in the center of her bed, and watched the shadows on the wall until she couldn’t bear to
any longer.

She felt a bit ridiculous, hiding out with her head under the covers, but it made her feel better. All the
shadows looked threatening, and she was still shaken from her dream, whatever it was.

It was so quiet.

The royal palace was a huge, sprawling complex that held numerous apartments, offices and meeting
rooms, as well as quarters for servants, guests, diplomats, functionaries, messengers and guards. In
the wing set aside for the royal family, there was only herself and her father these days.
She rather wished it were a bit more crowded sometimes. The whole floor lay between her room and
her father’s room.

Not that she’d ever dare go to him in the middle of the night, complaining about nightmares of all
things. 
He’d probably kill her where she stood, and he’d be right to, of course. The weak were eliminated—
survival of the fittest.

Unbidden, a memory of long ago came to her.

She couldn’t have been more than three or so. She and Zuzu were still in the nursery back then. 
They had shared the room, and the adjoining playroom/classroom. She had ruined some plants in
mother’s garden, and the gardener told her bad girls got eaten by monsters that lived under beds.
For some reason she still couldn’t fathom, she had believed him, and had woken in the night utterly
convinced that there was a monster lying in wait under her bed. She had run over to Zuko’s bed. For
some reason, she’d been sure he could keep monsters away.

He’d been cranky when she’d woken him up—he always was, when he first woke up, especially if
he wasn’t ready to wake up yet.

He hadn’t made fun of her. He’d just let her climb in with him, and dried her tears, and told her
monsters were cowardly, and wouldn’t attack so long as they were together…and if they did, he’d
protect her.
She’d fallen right back to sleep, without a care in the world.

In the morning, mother had smiled at him and told him he was a wonderful big brother. 
Father had been distinctly unimpressed with both of them.
She’d never gone to Zuko ever again. She’d spent a number of sleepless nights huddled in the nursery, determined to face down the monsters by herself.

After days like that, she’d been too tired to keep staying up each night, and had fallen asleep. When she wasn’t eaten by monsters, she had decided that father was right, and there really was no such thing. When she told him as much, he asked her why she’d ever thought there was.

She told him about the gardener. He’d had him called in and executed him right there and then.

“It’s the only proper way to deal with fools and weaklings.”

She had resolved there and then to never be either.

Eventually, her heart stopped pounding, and the air under the sheets became stifling. Still feeling a bit ridiculous at her reaction to a silly dream, she kicked away the sheets and spread out across the bed as though daring any shadows to try to claim her.

She was Princess Azula—heir apparent, fire bending prodigy. There was nothing in this world that could hurt her; most of the peasants would never dare so much as raise their voice against her, and she was stronger, faster and more deadly than any of the soldiers.

She couldn’t beat her father…

That wasn’t a problem, of course—she was loyal, and dedicated her every moment to serving both he and her country with all that she had. He had no reason to strike her down. She was his daughter, so of course he wouldn’t.

*Fire, so large and hot it sucked away all the air in the hallway. The paint on the walls bubbled and peeled as it passed and the tapestries—old and dry—went up in a flash and disintegrated into ash. It was coming right at her…*

She wrenched her mind away from thoughts of that night. She made it a point to never think of it. It was over, and she had performed just as expected.

He had known she would get away. He had.

If it had been Zuzu in her place, that would have been a different story. He wouldn’t have expected him to be able to get away, and so that would have been an attempt on his life. It was different with her.

Her father had known she was smart. He knew she would act for the best interest of the nation.

He had known she wouldn’t allow that idiot kidnapper to continue holding her when there was a hallway-sized column of flame bearing down on them—and she hadn’t.

She had bitten, clawed and kicked for all she worth, dropped to the floor and immediately threw herself face down upon it and held very, very still.

It had taken months for her hair to grow back.

It was a good thing the royal hairdressers knew their stuff; she’d been saved the indignity of losing the rest of her hair so it would be even. They had skillfully hidden the short patches until they had grown back and then had trimmed her hair to even everything out.
Father had been annoyed that he’d had to get out of bed to rescue her.

Zuko had gotten startled when he’d woken up and saw someone he didn’t recognize standing over him and had blasted a fireball right into the man’s face. It was the commotion that had alerted everyone that there were assassins and kidnappers in the palace.

She was the only one who had needed rescuing.

Iroh and Lu Ten had been there that night—one of the few times all of them were in one place at the same time, which is probably what had triggered the attack in the first place. 
Mother, Iroh and Lu Ten had downed their opponents and then all of them had gone running to save Zuko. Her father was the only one who noticed she’d been taken, and he’d gone to save her.

After everything was over, and the mess cleaned up somewhat, everyone had gone back to bed.

She had started crying. She wasn’t sure why—nerves, maybe?

She had never gone back to Zuko after that one time, when she thought there were monsters under the bed.

He came to her that night. He didn’t say anything, he just climbed in behind her and put his arm around her. She’d been able to fall asleep then.

Their father had been marginally proud of Zuko for trying to stand up to his attacker—shamed and disappointed that he hadn’t been able to take him down on his own.
He’d been utterly disgusted that his son had apparently went crying to his baby sister in the middle of the night, looking for comfort and sympathy.

For some reason, Zuko had never corrected him on what had actually happened, he’d just let him continue thinking he’d been frightened and upset and had done just what he thought.

Her brother had always been a fool like that.
It would have gone better for him by far if he had just sold her out and exposed her weakness.
He would never do that though—it wouldn’t be honorable.

He never learned, and what had it gotten him?
Banished, sent on a seemingly impossible task, and half his face burned off.
Even after all that, he was still the same stupid Zuzu. He talked about honor like it meant something.

“This is all so stupid. Why am I even thinking about all of this? Those things happened a long time ago. I’m neither a fool nor a weakling—I learned the lesson of the gardener well. After the whole debacle with the kidnappers, I made sure I had the tools to fight back and protect myself should anything like that ever happen again. I’m alive, and I’ll stay that way. Let it go.”

It felt like a knot loosening.

She sat up suddenly, recalling the instructions on the scroll she’d borrowed from the library.

“Do you mean to tell me that I’ve actually been afraid all this time?”

She had. Here in the dark, with no one around but herself, she could admit it…barely.

She’d been afraid of being killed—for being weak, useless, in the way, not good enough.
She had no idea she’d held on to those two memories so tightly, or that they’d had affected her so
deeply—especially because it was all so ridiculous. Her father had featured prominently in both memories. Her father wasn’t going to kill her. She was his favored child, his heir.

She was being ridiculous, and it needed to stop.

She laid back down and closed her eyes. Sleep came quickly. It had been a trying couple of weeks.
Harry and the gaang return to Omashu and find things have changed a lot since they were last there.

“Oh no…” Katara murmured.


“It’s terrible…” Aang said with anguish.

“Who could do such a thing?” Sokka added his own lament.

“Will someone tell me what the heck is going on?” Toph asked again.

“The ground down below is scorched and burned. It looks like a whole forest was burned down.” Harry explained.

“It’s obvious who would do it. Fire Nation.” Katara growled, the words a curse on her lips.

They landed near the edge of the devastation. The fire was at least a few months old, but it was still a black scar on the land.

Aang wandered into the center of the devastation and slumped in place.

“This…this is all my fault. What’s wrong with me? Here I am, wanting to take a vacation…”

“Oh, Aang. This isn’t your fault. It isn’t.” Katara insisted. “This is Fire Nation…and we already knew they were monsters.”

“You’re not responsible for what other people do, Twinkletoes. The war wasn’t your doing. I mean, heck, you were born a hundred years ago. You were frozen in an iceberg. Stuff happens sometimes.”

“Yeah, Aang. Sometimes your canoe smashes up while you’re out fishing. When that happens, you kick the ice and start walking.” Sokka agreed. “And you won’t be of any help to anyone if you burn yourself out with constant training and battles. You’re one person. You can only do so much.”

“In any case, relax. The earth is healthy, no matter what it might look like on the surface. It’s all full of seeds too. Spring is coming. When it gets here, this whole area is going to be filled with new growth.”

“It still shouldn’t have happened in the first place. It wouldn’t have if I hadn’t run away.”

“Don’t do that, Aang. Playing ‘what if’ helps no one. You don’t know what would have happened if you had stayed. You might have died, and the cycle might have been broken, the war might have only been delayed, not stopped. It might have been worse. There’s no way to tell. All you can do is deal with what is, not what could have been.” Katara said softly.

“Yeah…I guess you’re right.”
“Do you want to do something to help this place?” Harry asked suddenly.

“Well sure. What can I do though?”

“I actually have something that can help. You can give this place a year’s growth so it won’t be starting at scratch come spring."

“How could I do that?”

“I have this stuff that we use back home to quick grow plants in plant nurseries—usually food producing ones that have a long growth cycle before they start producing fruit. We have a lot of those. We quick grow them till they’re old enough they’d just have a season till they produce fruit and then let them age the rest of the way naturally.”

“How not just age them till they produce fruit?”

“Nah, it’s better to let things go natural as much as possible. Think about it—would you really want to eat fruit that has stuff in it that can quick age things? No, it’s better to give it a season to get the stuff out of its system and grow naturally. If you do this, these trees will have until spring to rid themselves of any residue, so no squirrels or other forest creatures should be injured in any way. Do you want to do this? It’s actually a good place for it. The recent burn will insure the trees all have plenty of nutrients to draw on for their quick growth.”

Aang nodded. “Yeah. It won’t make up for my failure to stop it in the first place…but it’s something.”

“Alright. You’ll need to use your earth sense to find the seeds and waterbending to carry the right amount of stuff to them. I’d prefer you didn’t touch the stuff if at all possible—it’s too easy for accidents to happen, and as you’ll see, a year’s growth’s worth of stuff isn’t much at all.”

They gathered on a low hill that overlooked the devastated area, and Harry unloaded his tent and dug out a largish jug.

“It’s bigger inside than out, so there’s actually a lot more stuff here than you think.” He explained as he uncorked it and stepped back. He drew his wand next and called out a glob of liquid roughly the size of a marble.

“This is a year’s growth. Drop a bit that size on the seeds. I’d concentrate on the tree seeds—plants grow pretty quickly, but trees take a while. Start with the ones furthest out and work your way towards where we are. You don’t need to cover every seed—the individual trees will need room to grow. Are you ready?”

Aang nodded and then blindfolded himself.

“Uh…why the blindfold?” Sokka wondered.

“My earth sense is better when I can’t peek. This will probably be hard enough without my eyes distracting me.”

“Ah. Fair enough.”

Harry packed away the tent and had everyone move back to give him some room. Aang stomped his foot to get some feedback and then bent a dozen marble sized globs of the aging solution out of the jug and sent them out to the edges of the burnt land.
Sokka and Katara watched the process with wonder. Toph dug her toes into the soil and listened to the rapid growth with something akin to awe on her face.

Aang cut a pretty impressive figure—part tribal shaman, part symphony conductor.

Everywhere he flicked his fingers, something grew: oaks, ash, beech, apple, cherry and elm, pine and willow, a large stand of bamboo that shot skyward so quickly you would miss it if you blinked, shrubs and wiry grasses erupted from between cracks and furrows in the ground.

Aang twisted and lifted his arms and sent one last stream of liquid pattering into the ground. A row of saplings erupted from the ground right below them, one after another.

Aang stood poised for a moment, arms up, as though listening and then relaxed and removed his blindfold.

Toph turned towards Aang to congratulate him on a job well done, but she was nearly bowled over by Katara, who threw her arms around Aang and pressed up against him.

“Oh, Aang…that was wonderful.”

Toph turned her back to the scene and crossed her arms, scowling. Sokka raised an eyebrow and looked at his sister like she’d grown a second head.

Aang’s eyes glazed over and his face began to flush.

Harry wasn’t sure, but he thought he might even have gone cross-eyed for a moment.

Aang wasn’t sure what to do with his hands, or even how to react to Katara’s sudden bout of physicality.

“Geez, let the guy breathe, Sugar queen.” Toph snapped, her voice waspish.

Harry packed away what was left of the aging solution. He wasn’t getting in the middle of whatever was happening. Sokka seemed to agree. He backed away and stood next to Harry and Appa. Hedwig and Momo fluttered down to their shoulders to watch as well.

Toph’s voice snapped Aang out of his love haze. He stepped back from Katara, confused, embarrassed, and a bit turned on. He didn’t understand what was going on, or why Katara was acting like this—wasn’t Jet her boyfriend? Wasn’t he travelling with her father on his ship, along with the rest of the Freedom Fighters?

Didn’t she think he was a baby who needed taking care of?

The last thought stopped him cold.

“Is that all that was? A ‘mom’ congratulating her ‘baby’ on a new trick?” he wondered.

He didn’t know, and he didn’t know what to do or how to react.

“Aang can breathe just fine!” Katara snapped back, before glancing back at Aang, a little hurt—both by his silence and the fact he hadn’t hugged her back.

“Hey” Aang croaked. His face flushed a bit pinker, so he cleared his throat and tried again. “Did you feel it? When the seeds sprouted?” he addressed Toph.

Toph uncrossed her arms and turned her head slightly in Aang’s direction.

“Yeah…it was like a fireworks display in the ground, but quiet…which makes no sense.”
“No, it does. It was like ‘bam’- life. It was almost like music.”

“It’s like that every spring, but it’s usually quieter-- more a ‘pop’ than a ‘bam’.” Toph explained.

“I can’t wait for spring now. I bet it’s amazing.”

“It is.”

“Hey, we should listen to it together, that’ll be fun.”

Toph snorted and punched him in the arm. “Idiot. We would have anyway. We don’t have to make a special arrangement.”

Aang blushed again and rubbed the back of his head, embarrassed.

“Oh, yeah, I guess so, huh?”

“Duh.”

Katara was now the one with her arms crossed. She wasn’t scowling, like Toph had been, but she did look decidedly displeased.

“So…there’s a town nearby. What do you say we stop in for the night?” Sokka asked loudly into the silence.

“Good idea.” Harry quickly agreed. “We should fly over there. I don’t want to damage any of the saplings and ruin Aang’s hard work. It looks great, doesn’t it? A tiny little forest in miniature. It’s sorta cute.”

“Do you have more of that stuff? I doubt this will be the last place like this we’ll come across. It’s hard to believe people can be so monstrous. Why cut down a beautiful forest for no reason?” Katara lamented.

“It wasn’t for no reason. This is a hardwood forest. Fire Nation was probably dancing a jig when they stumbled across it. They probably chopped it down and burnt the stumps to replenish the area.” Harry disagreed.

“Chopped, burned, what does it matter?”

“Well, if they had just rode by laughing and set the forest on fire, they’d be monstrous. If they chopped it down and harvested it, they’re just inconvenient. Like I said, it’s a hardwood forest. Hardwoods like oak burn hotter than softwoods do. You need really hot fires for metalworking. This forest was sacrificed to one of their factories, same as that place in the mountains. It’s like I was saying before about the cost of technology. Smelting metal takes hot fires that burn for a long time, and for that you need a lot of wood—preferably hardwoods like are found here. Firebenders produce their fire internally. It’s unlikely that most, if any, can produce fires hot enough, for long enough, to work metal, so they need wood—lots of it. No, this fire was set to replenish the area after they clear-cut it. If they had just set a hardwood forest on fire and left it, it would have burned hot and out of control all through this area if it wasn’t stopped in time. This was a controlled, purposeful burn that, from the looks of it, didn’t come anywhere near threatening the nearby town.”

Katara’s face twisted for a moment, and she stroked the necklace her mother had given her, but she chose not to argue the point—he could still tell she disagreed. To her, Fire Nation killed her mother, therefore Fire Nation was monstrous. End of story.
She was usually so kind and cheerful, he really hadn’t thought much about how much she and Jet had in common in this one instance. Jet nursed his hatred and kept it at a fever pitch to keep himself
going. Katara had buried hers deep and then immersed herself in caring for the tribe and her family so she didn’t have to deal with it. That hatred had been there, festering all these years, and it was slowly oozing to the surface now that she had a chance to strike back.

Sadly, it made him glad she and Aang were currently on the outs. Aang had been so wrapped up in her, right from the start: he always took her side, agreed with her. He would have done most anything for her. Were he willing to be swayed that way, Katara would have been in a perfect position to goad him towards annihilating Fire Nation to answer her pain. Aang was supposed to be a neutral party—at least inasmuch as any human being could be. The last thing the world needed was to have Katara whispering pretty poison in his ear.

He didn’t think she’d really go quite that far, but one never could tell. She was irrational when it came to her mother. Her pain was more terrible, more fearsome, deeper and more devastating than anyone else’s—nevermind the sheer number of destroyed homes and families they’d come across already in their travels. He sometimes got the impression that she thought those things were sad, but didn’t really compare in any way to her own loss.

Heck, she didn’t really seem to remember sometimes that her brother had also lost his mother, or her father his wife.

Maybe he was being unfair to her, but that was the impression he’d been left with.

Either way, it was a situation that bore watching. Especially given how she was acting now, call it queen bee syndrome or Scarlet o’Hara. He didn’t know if she’d just gotten a wakeup call about Aang’s feelings for her and saw the value of what she’d lost, or if she just resented not having his blind, unthinking devotion anymore while still being indifferent to his feelings for her.

The sixth arrow was troublesome, that’s all there was to it.

They climbed up on Appa. Toph settled herself in the saddle right behind Appa’s head—where Aang normally sat—and splayed herself out comfortably, legs spread, arms lying across the saddle. Katara stuck her nose in the air and settled at the mid point, arms crossed and looking pouty. Sokka looked between the two girls and sighed, before settling across from his sister. Harry sprawled out along the back, mirroring Toph’s pose.

Momo looked for a moment like he was going to curl up with Toph, until Katara lured him towards herself with a bit of dried fruit she had in her pocket. She looked rather triumphant when he came to her instead, though of course Toph couldn’t see her expression. Sokka could.

In fact, he cast a ‘can you believe how nuts my sister is’ look Harry’s way when he saw what she’d done.

All Harry could say is he hoped Katara got whatever her malfunction was out of her system before she tore the whole group apart.

“Um…guys? Look at the town.”

“Wow, look at that!” Toph said brightly.

When they all turned to look at her she waved her hand in front of her face.

“Blind, remember? What’s going on?”

“All we really saw as we were coming in was the wall and the peaks of the roofs—we were more focused on the burnt ground.”

Appa landed just outside the wall, and they all hopped out.
“The place is wrecked. The houses are smashed up, and it seems empty.”

“Still say Fire Nation isn’t monstrous.” Katara asked, her voice arch.

“I doubt this was Fire Nation. Nothing’s burned.” Harry pointed out.

“Someone’s in there.” Toph told them.

“Let’s go see what we can find out.” Aang decided.

There was only one inhabitant left, an old man. They had to coax him out of hiding.

“It all started a few months ago; each night at sunset an angry spirit rampages. It was the spirit that did all this. It’s been kidnapping people too. I’m all that’s left.”

“Aang is the avatar.” Katara assured him. “I’m sure he can fix whatever is wrong and stop the spirit.”

The old man looked at Aang like he was water in the desert.

“Avatar? Please, help us. I beg of you, please.”

“I’ll do whatever I can.” Aang assured him.

The old man started crying, and just kept repeating ‘thank you, thank you.’

“Sunset isn’t too long from now. You should get ready Aang.” Sokka pointed out.

“Yeah…”

“Relax, Twinkletoes. I’ve got your back.”

“We’re all here to help Aang.” Katara interjected sourly.

“I never said you weren’t Sweetness.”

“Uh, guys? Sunset.” Harry interjected.

Aang straightened and stood just before the main gates, where the old man said the spirit usually arrived from. The rest of them spread out behind him, halfway between him and the last undamaged building, where the old man was hiding.

Everyone tensed when the air between the gate posts rippled.

“A giant panda bear?” Sokka muttered.

“He doesn’t look too violent…” Katara added.

The panda chuffed, walked up to Aang, butted him with his head, and then turned to leave. A crowd of people stumbled past it, all of them looking confused and disoriented. The air rippled a second time and the panda was gone. All that was left was a stand of bamboo in the gateway.

“Uh…what just happened?” Toph wondered.

“Everyone! You’re back! You’re alive! Avatar! Thank you!” the old man cried as he stumbled out of the house behind them.
All the newly returned people looked very uncomfortable, and they began hobbling off to the different half-destroyed buildings.

“Excuse me, pardon me…I really need to go to the bathroom!”

“Uh, Aang? Do you have any idea what just happened?” Sokka wondered.

“I think I do… There was a statue of a bear at the center of the burned forest. I felt it while I was growing seeds. The panda must be the spirit of the forest. It was angry when it was burned down and punishing the people here because of it. It’s sort of funny, but I actually took care of the problem before we ever came here.”

“Convenient.” Harry laughed.

“How do we get out of here now? The gate is blocked…the spirit might get angry again if we cut down the bamboo.”

“Yeah, we probably shouldn’t stay here. I think the people here have enough to deal with already.”

“Please, Avatar, don’t leave! Allow us to thank you for your help.” The old man protested.

In ones and twos the other people of the village were coming back, and they added their voices to the protest.

“Yes, avatar, allow us to show our gratitude. You saved us all.”

While everyone was entreating Aang to stay, Harry hit the stand of bamboo with a spell when no one was looking. The bamboo pulled itself from the ground and replanted itself along the road leading into the town.

Appa, Momo and Hedwig were the only ones who noticed. Hedwig shrugged and went hunting. Appa and Momo tried to talk to the bamboo. They were really quite amazed; neither one had ever seen mobile plants before.

“What did you just do?” Toph demanded quietly.

“I just convinced the bamboo to go somewhere more convenient.”

“You’re a strange, weird guy, Padfoot.”

“Sadly, I get that a lot.”

They continued on their way the next day. As they got further south, signs of Fire Nation military presence began to show up more often: bases filled with tanks and soldiers, towers with catapults, more clear-cut forests, and port towns bearing Fire Nation flags.

“I beginning to think it might be a mistake to go to Omashu. When we were there a few months ago, they were already saying the war front was headed their way.” Sokka pointed out.

“That makes it all the more important! I need to know what happened to Bumi!”

“We’re going to need to head further east then, and try sneaking up on the city somehow. There doesn’t seem to be a lot of military outposts further in, they mostly seem to be hugging the coast.”
Harry pointed out.

“Of course they are, that’s where all the good land is. Central Earth Kingdom is nothing but a big desert wasteland.” Toph scoffed. “If you really do want to sneak closer…and given how many times we’ve already been fired on, I think that is a good idea, we could always go looking for the cave of the two lovers.”

“Cave of the two lovers?” Katara asked curiously.

“Yeah, it’s a legend passed down from the founding of Omashu, there’s even a song about them: Oma and Shu, the first earthbenders called "Secret Tunnel". There used to be two villages on either side of the mountain that became Omashu. The villages were at war, but a man from one village and a woman from the other met and fell in love. There were caves under the mountain that separated them, so they tried using them to meet in secret. While they were down there, they met a couple of badger moles and learned earthbending. They’re supposed to have made a labyrinth down there so no one would find them. The man eventually died in the war, and the woman was heartbroken. She went to the top of the mountain and in a display of awesome earthbending, created the city that stands there to this day, which she named Omashu for herself and her boyfriend. She decreed that their warring peoples would live there together in peace, and she became the first queen there. The underground tunnels, from what I’ve heard, are actually there, and should lead you right up close to the city.”

“Do you know where the entrance to the tunnels is?”

“It’s on the desert side of the mountains, north of Omashu somewhere, but I don’t know the exact location. I’d have to be on the earth to even attempt to find it.”

“Hey, Hedwig!”

“Hey, good idea, she’s good at finding stuff.” Sokka nodded.

“Finding people, yeah. I don’t know if she can just find a place, but I figure it can’t hurt to ask.”

“Hedwig, you are awesome.”

Hedwig straightened and puffed out her chest, and somehow conveyed the idea that ‘of course she was, and shame on you for ever doubting.’

Appa balked at the cave entrance and refused to go in further.

“Appa hates going underground.”

“Maybe we should leave he, Momo and Hedwig hidden in the mountains then. If Omashu is either besieged or occupied, I don’t really want to take any of them into the middle of a war zone. If we really need a quick getaway, I do have the carpet.”

“It might be for the best, especially if Appa is this upset at even the idea of going into the cave.” Katara agreed.

“Can you find a good place for all of you to hide, away from people?”

Appa groaned and licked Aang’s face.
“Fly low so you’re not seen. Hedwig can warn you of people nearby, and Momo can help keep watch.”

Hedwig and Momo both settled themselves on the saddle behind Appa’s head and indicated that they would do so.

Appa lifted just a few feet from the ground, and began flying off, and Hedwig launched herself so she could be in the lead and began flying them on a winding trail away from there.

“Alright, let’s go.” Toph announced.

“Are you sure you can find the way? Didn’t you say it was a labyrinth?” Sokka demanded.

“Greatest earthbender in the world.” Toph reminded him.

“It’s so dark in here. We don’t have any torches or anything.”

Toph opened her mouth, but Katara continued before she could say anything.

“And unlike you, we can’t see with our feet.”

Aang got a ‘eureka’ look on his face and began stripping off his shoes.

“Good thinking, Twinkletoes. Just because you’re on vacation it’s no reason to slack off completely.”

“That still doesn’t help the rest of us!”

“No worries. Here.” Harry offered as he held up his spare wand. “Lumos.” He wanted to keep his normal wand handy in case of trouble.

Light erupted from the tip and filled the cavern, allowing them to see several feet in every direction.

“That stick of yours is really damned handy.”

Aang and Toph set off together into the darkness, with the other three bringing up the rear, surrounded by the circle of light.

“There’s all kinds of stuff down here—badger moles, wolf-bats, cave hoppers” Toph stamped her foot again and listened. “There’s also a big cavern filled with carvings and stuff at the center of the maze. The badger moles keep moving the tunnels around. You’re really lucky you have me. I think most folks would probably get lost down here.”

“I can’t see quite that far.” Aang lamented. “I can only feel the closest tunnels”

Katara sped her steps until she was next to Aang, and she put a gentle hand on his arm.

“Oh, Aang, don’t be so hard on yourself. You haven’t been practicing earthbending for very long…” Katara said soothingly in her best motherly voice.

“Oh boy” Harry muttered under his breath. Sokka glanced at him suspiciously and then twitched when Aang shrugged off Katara’s hand and growled at her.
“I’m not a BABY”

“Wh-what…Aang…”

“No. Just stop it. I’m not a baby, I’m not your son and I don’t need you fussing over me all the time!”

Aang stomped off into the darkness, hands clenched at his side. Katara stayed where she was, frozen in shock and dismay.

“Yeah, nice job, Sugar queen.” Toph muttered as she stomped after him.

Sokka growled and looked like he was going to go tearing off after Aang to beat him about the head till he apologized, but Harry clamped a hand on his arm and shook his head.

“Don’t. Just stay out of it. I certainly plan to.”

They caught up to Katara, who had her arms crossed and looked both angry and miserable.

“Come on. We don’t want to get left behind.”

They were walking for what felt like hours, following a tunnel and then stepping into adjoining tunnels through doorways made by Aang or Toph whenever they sensed something dangerous up ahead, till they finally came to a large stone-covered doorway.

“The exit!” Sokka cheered.

“Nope, the halfway point. I think it’s a tomb, actually.” Toph corrected.

Aang stomped his foot and waved his arm to the left, which caused the large stone covering to roll aside. Everyone stepped through and they found themselves in a large cavern, decorated with carvings. They stood at the top of a steep staircase that led down to the floor. In the center was an elaborate stone cairn covered in pictures and writing.

“Love shines brightest in the darkness.” Katara read from the wall where they’d come in. There was a large bas-relief underneath the inscription. “And it shows two people kissing.”

The rest of them wandered down to the cairn.

“I think these pictures are telling the story you were telling us about earlier. This seems to be the grave of Oma and Shu.”

“They met on a mountain that divided their two villages…” Aang began reading, while Toph circled the tomb, tapping each bas-relief in turn so she could ‘see’ it.

“Love shines brightest in the darkness, huh? I’m gonna turn off the light for a second, okay?”

As the light disappeared, inky darkness filled the cavern, leaving everyone blind, except Toph, who didn’t notice the difference.

When their eyes started to adjust, they realized they could see a faint glow overhead.

“Very clever. I guess they couldn’t sense the earth quite like you do, Toph.”

“Why? How do you know?”
“There’s a whole bunch of glowing crystals in the ceiling that you can only see when the lights are off. I think they show the way out.”

“That’s…kind of disappointing, actually. They were the first earthbenders, and they learned from badger moles, the same as I did.”

“And they both relied on sight, so it probably never really occurred to either of them to use the earth as their eyes, even when underground. They just found a new light source.”

“Whatever. Let’s go. It’s not much further now.”

“Princess, you should come out on deck for some fresh air.”

“I’m resting and do not wish to be disturbed.”

“How about some nice dinner? The chef is…”

“Did you not hear me?”

She could hear Li (or was it Lo? They were twins, and she’d never been able to tell them apart) shuffling around outside her door, until she finally left.

Azula went back to contemplating the view outside the tiny window her room boasted. Nothing but ocean as far as the eye could see.

She still couldn’t believe her father was sending her away like a child while he ‘cleaned house’, instead of letting her help. It was ridiculous—no one was more loyal or hated traitors to the nation more than she did. He acted like she couldn’t be trusted to spot schemers. Damn that Zhao anyway. The man went crazy and started having delusions of grandeur, and she was the one paying for it. It wasn’t like she’d been in contact with the man! She’d had no idea he was going around spouting such nonsense until Zuko told her—so why was she being treated like she was an active conspirator? It just wasn’t fair.

In fact, the only bright spot in the whole mess was that he’d relented on allowing her to go to Omashu where Mai was, rather than the back end of nowhere—not that Omashu was any place she actually wanted to visit, but at least she’d have company there beyond the two old biddies waiting down below.

Her face darkened in anger as she recalled how persuasive she’d had to be to be allowed to visit her old school friend—the way he’d acted, you’d think he suspected she and Mai were going to be plotting to overthrow him the moment they got together.

It was ridiculous and infuriating and… She closed her eyes and took several deep, even breaths until she was sure the treacherous sting of tears she’d felt would never be more than that.

She didn’t know what was wrong with her anymore—she seemed to be crying at the drop of a hat.

When she’d regained control of herself, she went back to staring pensively out at the ocean. She had hoped she and Mai would be able to drop in on Ty Lee for a visit while she was out here, but that probably wouldn’t be possible. The ship was supposed to drop her off and then return for some generals that were going to be investigating the war effort up close and personal once father cleaned house.
She was going to be stuck in a provincial backwater slum for Agni only knew how long, with no purpose and nothing to do, and without the usual complement of maids, hairdressers, manicurists and masseuses that made life worth living. It was awful and she was not happy with her father’s decision—not at all.

Feeling agitated and uneasy at her thoughts, which bordered on treason—the Fire Lord was always right, and his subjects were happy to obey his littlest whim—she turned from the window and decided to try getting some work done.

She unpacked the chakras scroll she borrowed weeks ago from the library and unrolled it.

“The second chakra is the water chakra. It is located in the sacrum. It runs on pleasure and is blocked by guilt.”

Since her breakthrough with the earth chakra, she’d had to accept that her chakras were not open, no matter what she might have liked to think. She’d forced herself to go back and try again, even if she really didn’t want to, after all the hell she’d gone through opening the first one.

It wasn’t going any better than the first one was. She was sleeping restlessly, and sitting for hours in fruitless meditation while trying to figure out what she felt guilty about. So far, her answer was still nothing.

How was she supposed to open the stupid thing when she didn’t know the right answer? She was tempted—more than tempted, really—to just throw the stupid scroll overboard and forget she ever saw it, but the idea of Zuko breezing through something she was finding so difficult was keeping her up nights.

She sat down on the floor in the middle of her quarters in the lotus position, eyes closed, back straight, and tried to meditate.

“What do I feel guilty of?”

“Still think the avatar isn’t dangerous?”

“I never said he was not dangerous, Prince Zuko, I only said that you should consider what your ultimate goals are.”

Zuko huffed and looked out over the former village of Gaipan. The soldiers that used to be stationed in the village, before it had been destroyed by a ‘freak flood that came out of nowhere’, and a ‘killing mist filled with monsters’ were all back on the ship having their injuries tended to. They were already laden down with soldiers from a base further down the river that they’d come across that had also been destroyed by ‘squidman monsters, mist and explosions’, which left the buildings destroyed, the tanks wrecked, and the soldiers homeless. They were going to drop all of them off at Pohai Stronghold to report what happened and be reassigned.

“The war doesn’t seem to be going too well for us in this part of the world, does it?”

“No, Prince Zuko, it does not.”

“Let’s get back on the ship. I don’t want to lose their trail.”
“You want us to sneak in through the sewers. Oh man…this vacation sucks.” Sokka griped.

“You saw as well as we did that Omashu is now under Fire Nation control.” Harry sighed.

“It was kinda hard to miss. The mountain used to be white—it’s now black. There’s a big Fire Nation Flag hanging over the gate, and there’s a half dozen smokestacks spewing thick black smoke over everything.”

“Come on, the sooner we get in, the sooner we can find Bumi.”

“It will be fine. We can use waterbending to keep the sewer water away from us.” Katara said brightly.

Harry tapped Toph, then Sokka, then himself on the head and performed a bubble-head charm.

“Let’s go then.”

Aang went in first, Katara right behind, then Sokka, then Harry, with Toph bringing up the rear.

Aang and Katara began bending the sewer water away from them.

“See? Worked perfectly.”

“Bleagh!”

“Yeareth!”

“Ugh!”

The other three groaned as the water reformed into a stream behind the two benders and soaked all of them in turn.

“Thank you so much for this helmet thing…I don’t even want to imagine getting any of this gunk in my mouth.” Sokka shuddered.

When they arrived at the bottommost street level of Omashu, Aang and Katara hopped out, clean and dry. Sokka, Harry and Toph looked like swamp monsters.

“Ooops.” Katara snickered, before bending some water out of a nearby barrel and soaking the three of them. Aang smiled apologetically and bent away the soaking water into the sewer.

Harry removed his bubblehead and then Toph’s, but he hesitated when he turned to Sokka.

“Uh…what is that? It looks like a tiny octopus…with five tentacles.” Harry pointed to the small purple thing attached to Sokka's arm.

"YEAAAGGH." Sokka yelped.

“It’s a purple pentapus.” Aang explained while Sokka was freaking out and trying to pull the thing off himself.

“Stop, not like that!” Aang laughed as he gently smacked Sokka’s hands away from the thing. He rubbed it lightly on the head and the tentacles curled up, away from Sokka’s skin, which allowed the thing to be removed easily. Harry removed Sokka’s bubblehead.

“See? It’s perfectly harmless.” He grinned mischievously and pressed the thing against Sokka’s cheek, where it promptly latched on again.

“GAAA AAH AAH Getitoffgetitoff!” Sokka shrieked.
Katara rolled her eyes and copied Aang’s earlier actions. When the thing detached she tossed it back into the sewer, and Toph flicked her fingers to close the grate.

Sokka glowered at Aang and rubbed at the sucker marks that had been left behind on his face and arm.

“Now I’m all covered in creepy purple spots!”

“They’ll go away. I told you it’s perfectly harmless.”

“That’s not the point!”

“There’s people coming.” Toph warned quietly.

They all stopped talking and began to stroll casually down the street, trying to look like they belonged there.

Two Fire Nation soldiers rounded the corner and lifted their lanterns high.

“Hey! You kids, what are you doing out after curfew?”

“Curfew? Is it that late already? We were just on our way home.”

“What were you doing out?”

“Our brother is…sick. We had to see a healer.” Katara jumped in.

“None of you look sick to me.”

The soldier on the left raised his lantern a bit higher and peered at all of them suspiciously, until he came to Sokka, who was still moodily rubbing at the purple spots.

“What are those?”

“He’s the one that’s sick.” Toph lied.

“It’s…pentapox. Very contagious. We should probably get him inside and into bed.” Katara agreed immediately.

The two soldiers drew back in fright.

“Pentapox? I think I’ve heard of that…”

“Move along.” The soldier ordered, while he and his partner kept a wary distance.

The kids hurried on their way, following Toph’s instructions once they were out of sight to avoid any more patrols.

“That was lucky. What’s pentapox?” Aang wondered.

“I have no idea. It worked though, that’s all that matters.”

“Come on, let’s find Bumi.”
“Squid men and killing mist…and now rampaging forest spirits.”

“It is most disquieting” Iroh agreed. “I do have to wonder where the avatar got all the baby trees from though.”

“What are you talking about?”

“According to the old man, the forest was a charred burn mark and nothing more until the avatar arrived—overnight it was transformed into a potential forest filled with saplings of all kinds, and the bamboo grove was completely restored. One wonders where he’s been keeping all the trees, that’s all.”

“The old man was probably just confused.”

“He seemed quite certain of his information. He says the restoration of the forest seems to be what quieted the anger of the Hei Bai forest spirit and made him release all the people he’d stolen. He also said the avatar told them he had restored the forest with new growth before arriving at their town. We saw ourselves all the damage in the village. I do not think they were lying, Prince Zuko.”

“Whatever. Let’s keep moving. I don’t understand why they’re headed this way. They’ve already been to Omashu, and that’s really the only thing down this way. They already have an earthbending teacher for the avatar. While it’s unlikely anyone will be looking for them in these parts, it’s still dangerous! Omashu is Fire Nation now…”

“You have had some thought, Prince Zuko?”

“What if they’re going to attack the city and try to drive our people out?”

Iroh blinked in surprise when Zuko hurried past him, towards the ship.

“Prince Zuko! Wait! Where are you going?”

“I need to get to Omashu and warn Mai!”

“Prince Zuko, slow down…you don’t even know that the avatar is heading there!”

“King Bumi of Omashu is the avatar’s friend. Of course he’s going there! Word’s had time to spread about us taking it over.”

The gangplank was hurriedly lowered when they saw the Prince and General hightailing it back. Lieutenant Jee reminded the men that the Prince was rather high strung. Just because he was running didn’t mean there was anything to fear. The Prince started shouting orders as soon as he was aboard. Lieutenant Jee listened patiently, and then sent the prince out to stalk around on deck for a while to work off his excess energy, while he made the ship ready to set sail. General Iroh was winded and annoyed when he got aboard, so he sought solace in his usual manner—hanging out with the crew and drinking tea. Zuko stalked around on deck grumbling and gnashing his teeth until he got a hold of himself and then made his way down below as well. He’d been trying to be more social since the Eastern Air Temple.

Iroh had regained his equilibrium by the time Zuko rejoined him, but he was still annoyed at having had to run all that distance back to the ship.
“Tea, prince Zuko?”

Zuko sighed and nodded. Taking tea when it was offered, he’d found, saved him a lot of nagging and confusing proverbs.

Chang, who had been playing Pai Sho with the general, turned back to the game, and gave the prince a chance to drink some tea and relax a bit before speaking.

“Your pardon, prince Zuko…it’s only that I notice we left in quite a hurry. All is well, I do hope.”

“Everything’s fine. There was a rampaging forest spirit in the area, but the avatar passed through a few days ago and apparently took care of things.”

“Oh? Well, it’s good to know he is taking his job seriously.”

Iroh glanced up at him, then slanted a glance sideways towards his nephew, before returning to perusing the pieces on the board.

“What?”

“Well, the avatar is the bridge to the spirit world.” Chang explained. “When giant fish monsters run amok…or squid men…or angry forest spirits…the avatar exists to intercede on humanity’s behalf and turn aside their anger.”

Zuko frowned and stared down into his tea.

“I guess it’s lucky he appeared when he did, since all the spirit world suddenly seems to be up in arms…and while I realize it is your mission, my prince…it would seem providence was with us when you were unable to hold onto the avatar when you captured him. If I recall my old stories correctly…spirits get angrier and more powerful the longer they go unanswered.”

Zuko hunched in on himself and closed his eyes.

“The Fire Lord commanded me to find and subdue the avatar, who is the greatest enemy of our people. I’m not a traitor. I’m not.”

Chang’s face softened and his eyes lighted with sympathy.

“A prince is a leader and protector of his people. Where is there treachery in that?”

Zuko stared down at his teacup for a long time, then rose and left without a word. Lieutenant Jee and Iroh both let out a shaky breath once he was gone.

“You do enjoy living dangerously.” Jee growled at Chang.

“Like I said at the north pole, I’m an old man. Little scares me these days.”

He considered his selection of tiles and made his move.

“A world full of angry spirits is good for no one.” Chang answered before fixing Jee with a solemn gaze. “It’s bad enough for our young folks that their whole lives have been lived under the aegis of war…but when even the old folks like me can’t remember a time without it, there’s something seriously wrong with the world. My grandmother remembered a time before war, but she was the only one in the family that did. The country she remembered is a very different one than I’ve ever known, and I’ve seen our country change for the worse over my lifetime.”
He pursed his lips at Iroh’s move and considered his next.

“Don’t get me wrong—I love my nation, and I love my people. I’ve never been anything but proud to be Fire Nation…but sooner or later, something has to give. Setting up colonies and farms in the sparsely populated parts of Earth Kingdom close to our borders—good idea. Expanding our hold on those areas to make them more secure? Sure. Conquering the whole world and destroying it in the process? No. Enough is enough. I’ve kept my peace about how I felt all these years, but I’m tired of holding my tongue. How many of our young men won’t ever return home? How many mothers will never see their sons again? How many does it have to be before enough is enough?”

Jee sighed and took a seat nearby. He could hardly argue—he’d been thinking much the same himself, but unlike himself, Chang actually had the courage to say it out loud.

“Do you think the prince will listen?” he asked after a moment’s silence.

Iroh frowned while he considered his next move.

“Truthfully? I don’t know. I considered speaking many of the same sentiments our good Chang has spoken, but I hesitated to do so for fear it would have the opposite effect of what I was intending. For the moment, no, I think he will not listen…but he is also concerned for a young lady of his acquaintance at the moment, so that is perhaps understandable.”

“A young lady? Not the charming Miss Bei Fong, I take it?”

“No, a childhood friend of his sister’s…truthfully, I had not realized he held such lingering affection for her.”

“Underneath all the snarls and bluster, he’s a good kid. He’d likely do the same for anyone he knew.”

“You seem to have changed your tune with regard to my nephew, Lieutenant Jee.”

“What can I say, he sort of grows on you.”

“Can’t you find him? I’ve looked everywhere I can think of.”

“Sorry. I did a plotting spell, and got a sense of his general location, but I don’t know how to get there by just walking. I could pop you and I there directly, but as you already know, that method of travel is rather noisy. I only know one locator spell, but again, it wouldn’t be very helpful in this instance—it’s a glowing ball of light that leads you to your target, and it’s somewhat useless in this case, since it always goes by the most direct route—through walls and such. Toph or you could open the walls between here and there, but we’re trying to remain unseen. I can tell you he’s still alive, but that’s about it.”

Knowing his friend was still alive took some of the strain out of Aang’s face, but not all of it.

“I just don’t understand what happened. How could Fire Nation have taken this place over so easily if he’s still alive?”

“Maybe he let them.” Sokka offered.
“What!” Aang demanded.

“No, I think he’s right. He probably surrendered.” Harry agreed.

“Yeah…no offense, Aang, but he was pretty crazy.”

“Crazy like a fox.” Harry disagreed. He held up a hand to stall Aang’s protest. “He knows you’re out there, getting training to eventually face and defeat the Fire Lord. Had you not shown up here like you did, he probably would have fought—but you did show up, and he tested you to see if you would actually fight back when pushed. He was afraid you wouldn’t. Once he was satisfied that you could actually do what needed doing, he helped us out and gave us some advice to find a teacher for you. He probably surrendered and let them take him captive. Think about it—the city wasn’t destroyed, none of the citizens were killed or injured. He hands over the city, gets taken captive and waits. He’s probably going to bide his time until the moment is right and then take back the city. I spent awhile talking to him before I let him hold me prisoner, and I really think I’m right.”

“Wait…before you let him hold you prisoner?”

“Well, to be fair, he did actually catch me while I was sneaking in to bust all of you out, but yeah. Once he explained what he was up to, I let him hold me prisoner. I knew you wouldn’t fight at your best otherwise, because you’d be waiting for a rescue. So long as I’m with you, I will always watch your back, you know that…and I know that in return, you’ll watch mine. The thing is, you can’t always depend on me like that. I might not be there, and you might have to depend on yourself alone. He needed to see that you could do it, and more than that, you needed to know you could do it as well.”

“You left us covered in rock candy!” Katara hissed.

“I was covered in it too, remember?”

“Do you really think that’s what he’s doing?”

“Yeah, I really do. You did say he was a mad genius.”

“I guess I’ll have to wait till after the war to have my battle.” Toph sighed, disappointed.

“I guess…we should sneak back out.” Aang mumbled. It was obvious he didn’t like the idea at all.

“Someone’s coming” Toph warned, just as the rest of them noticed a light down below.

It was a middle-aged woman carrying a baby, and a teenage girl—probably her daughter, given the resemblance between them. They were bracketed front and back by guards carrying lanterns. Their voices echoed up to them.

“I hate this place…I thought my life in Fire Nation was dull. Compared to here, ugh.”

“Can’t you just be happy for once? We’re like royalty here. Do try to enjoy your father’s success.”

“Guys…” Toph warned, just as a massive boulder went careening down the slope towards them.

Aang was already in motion. He cast a worried glance at the group down below and airbended the boulder away from the people.

“There!” the guards pointed towards them.
“Ahh! It’s the resistance!” the woman screamed.

“Well crap.” Harry muttered as they all started running.

The bored teenage girl started chasing them, while the guards were still milling in confusion. She was fast, she was agile, and she apparently kept her sleeves filled with knives. She started chucking them at them as soon as she drew level. None of them were too worried—between Toph earthbending barriers to block them, Aang airbending them away from them, they really didn’t have to concern themselves overmuch.

They reached a dead end and turned to face the girl, and then the ground opened up beneath them and swallowed them up.

“Why didn’t you warn us?” Katara demanded of Toph.

“They’re obviously earthbenders, and that woman back there said something about resistance. We’re not Fire Nation, so I figured we were safe enough.” She retorted, quite unconcerned.

The earthbenders that had captured them led them into a large cavern filled with people.

“Avatar, we’re glad to see you. We can finally make some real progress on taking back the city.”

Harry recognized the guy from their last visit—he was the head guard that had smacked himself in the face when Bumi decided to throw a feast for Aang, Sokka and Katara after they’d taken a ride on the mail system, wrecked half the city and destroyed a guy’s cabbage cart.

“When Fire Nation came, what did Bumi do?” Aang asked.

The guard’s face crumpled in shame and outrage. “He said ‘I’m going to do nothing’ and then cackled.” He growled.

Aang’s shoulders relaxed and he gave Harry and Sokka a wan grin. “Looks like you two were right.”

“Right about what?”

“We were wondering how Omashu fell, when last we heard, his majesty was planning to protect the city. It seems he did so, just not in the way anyone was expecting.” Harry replied.

“Protecting? He surrendered! He surrendered without a single battle!”

“He made sure the city remained undamaged, and the citizens stayed safe.” Aang corrected with a small smile. “He made sure everyone lived to fight another day.”

The group of resistance fighters looked at one another uncertainly.

“I’m currently training to eventually face the Fire Lord. We have struck numerous blows against the Fire Nation in the meantime, but we’ve attacked bases and ships full of soldiers. Until the Fire Lord is defeated, the war will continue. You can continue your resistance here, but there is another way. You can let go for the moment, and live to fight another day, when it will do the most good. We think that’s what Bumi is planning.” Aang explained.

The former guard, who seemed to be in charge, looked pained at the idea of letting the city just go without continuing to fight for it, but the others looked less conflicted.
“Yung…I know it goes against your instincts…but living to fight another day is sounding better and better.”

“If his majesty is planning to eventually retake the city when the time is right…so long as we’re here, we’re hostages for his good behavior. He’s imprisoned at the moment, in a metal box that leaves only his face free.” His shoulders slumped and he gave them a rueful smile. “It could be that your surmise is correct. He did seem oddly cheerful about his imprisonment.”

“Well, all we need to do then is get everyone out of the city.”

“How do you propose we do that?”

Everyone frowned and got lost in thought.

“You know…I have an idea that just might work.” Katara offered.

Toph seemed to catch on first. “Sugar queen, you are a genius! Those guards earlier were really scared. If the rest of them react the same way…”

“Pentapox?” Harry wondered.

Katara smiled and turned Sokka’s face so the others could see the sucker marks.

“Pentapox.” She agreed.
The gaang makes an unexpected stop and Harry has an uncomfortable realization.

“Sir? It’s the royal procession ship. They’re hailing us.”

Zuko followed the crewman up to the bridge, where he took the spyglass offered by Lieutenant Jee.

“We’re on a course to intercept. By their heading, they appear to be going to Omashu as well.”

“What the hell is Azula doing here?”

“I suppose we shall find out, nephew, as soon as we are close enough to them to speak.” Iroh replied, his gaze troubled.

It took the ships awhile to actually pull alongside one another. It was a bit depressing how much larger Azula’s ship was than his, but the last three years had taught him to roll with the punches. At least being on top of the tower brought him level with her deck—he was spared the indignity of having to gaze up at her, at least.

“Zuzu, what are you doing here?”

“I’m tracking the avatar. He’s probably already in Omashu by now.”

“Omashu is now Fire Nation territory. I find it odd that you’re willing to go there, when you weren’t willing to board this ship just a few weeks ago.”

“Mai is there. She has no idea what they’re capable of!”

“Running off to the rescue? First apples and now avatars; how sweet.”

“You haven’t seen the last couple of bases we’ve come across. I was going to warn her at the very least… protect her if I could.”

Azula got an odd look on her face, but her eyelids dropped and shielded her gaze before he could really interpret it. She crossed her arms and looked away, past his shoulder and out to sea.

“Zuzu the great protector.” She murmured. “Ready to hare off at a moment’s notice.” She snorted lightly. “Why, you’d probably even storm the very capital of Fire Nation, banished or not, if you thought you needed to.”

Zuko frowned slightly in confusion. Though her words had their usual mocking lilt, there wasn’t as much bite to them as usual.

“Az? Are you alright?”

“If I wasn’t, would you do it? Would you storm the palace for me?” she asked, her voice arch.
“Of course I would. Do you really need to ask?” Zuko replied.

Her gaze flicked to his for a moment and then back away.

“I’m sure Mai will be thrilled to see you again.”

Just like that she was gone from the railing. Zuko frowned at the space where she’d been, wondering at their odd conversation, before telling the helmsman to continue towards their destination. Azula had a faster, larger ship. She’d get there long before them. Well, at least Mai would have some forewarning of his visit…although if Azula was there, he didn’t really need to go—she was certainly more than capable of defending Mai. Of course, if he wasn’t there, she might try doing something stupid like killing the avatar… or, it could be he was just making excuses because part of him really wanted to see Mai again. He hadn’t seen her since she was what, twelve or thirteen? He was rather curious to see how she’d grown up in the intervening years.

“I hope all those people will be alright.” Aang sighed.

“We got them out of the city, away from the soldiers and the front lines of the war. They have earthbenders with them to make shelters, and so long as they stay on the fertile side of the mountains, they should be able to find food enough to see them to Ba Sing Se, or wherever they decide to go.” Katara reassured him.

“I sent Hedwig with a message to your dad. They should be on the lookout for all of them. They’ll ferry them across when they get there, and I’m sure that general will see to getting them the proper papers to get them settled should they choose to go to the city.”

“It was kinda fun, watching all those soldiers freak out like that.” Sokka chuckled.

“It was funny, but geez, don’t they have healers or anything? They didn’t even try to find out what was wrong, they just drove everyone out of the city.” Harry grumbled.

“We were kind of counting on that.” Sokka reminded him.

“I know, and I’m glad it worked, but that’s really no way to behave.”

They were heading south, towards Kyoshi island. The idea was to hang out for a bit, until Hedwig returned, and send a message to Suki.

“Uh, Aang…aren’t we flying kinda low?”

“Aang?!”

“Huh? Whoa.”

“What was that?”

“I don’t know…I thought I heard something calling me.”

A cyclone suddenly erupted below them. Aang did what he could to shield them from it, but he wasn’t able to hold it. They were torn from the saddle and sent flying down into the greenery below.
Sokka managed to latch on to Toph, who was completely terrified—not that sight was particularly comforting when you were falling through the air at high speed, but at least they knew what was happening.

Harry’s last sight of everyone was of them each spinning off in separate directions; then he blacked out.

Azula sat stiffly in her curtained palanquin and tried not to fidget at the slow pace of the procession. The gates of Omashu were coming into view, so it wouldn’t be long now. She briefly wondered over her brother and uncle and how long it would take them to arrive—they had a small ship, and so had been easily outpaced in the water, but they wouldn’t be constrained by the slow, dignified procession afterwards like she was.

She kept herself still and silent, and let the bearers do their work.

Finally, they were through the gates and then wound through the city to the highest point, where a lovely pagoda-style Fire Nation palace had been installed in place of the former king’s earthbender-only monstrosity.

Mai was waiting near the front gate to the palace, looking as dour and grim as ever. They must have sent word ahead that she was coming.

The palanquin was finally set down and she was able to stand on her own feet again.

Mai bowed—greater noble to one greater still—from the waist with hands palm to palm in front of her.

“Please…tell me you’re here to kill me.” Mai said in her usual deadpan manner, then she started laughing and stepped forward to hug her.

“That bad, darling?”

“You have no idea. Everything in this place is so boring. Well, that’s not true, we did have some excitement recently. Some earth kingdom resistance tried to flatten me with a boulder last night…and then this morning there was a plague or something. Father drove them all out of the city.”

Azula stepped back and looked around.

“Is that why it’s so quiet? You haven’t any citizens? I just assumed they were overawed at my presence among them, or that you sent everyone indoors so I wouldn’t be swarmed by peasants.”

“No. It’s just my family and I and the soldiers now. Everyone else is gone. Well, we have former king Bumi, but that’s it.”

“What of the avatar?”

“What about him?”

“Zuzu said he was heading this way. He was all in a tizzy to get here and protect you from him.”

Mai rolled her eyes—whether at the thought she needed protecting, or the idea that Zuko was
rushing out here to do just that, she wasn’t sure. She probably assumed she was teasing—well, wouldn’t she be surprised.

Harry woke entangled in vines, and hanging suspended from a large, gnarly tree over a puddle of still, murky water.
It took some doing to get untangled, and when he did, he plummeted the last few feet to the ground and landed with a splash in the muck.
He was a bit banged up, but that was all—no serious injuries, no broken bones. Given what could have happened, he supposed getting soaked in swamp water was a small price to pay. He hoped the rest of his friends had fared as well.

He slogged out of the water and onto one of the sprawling roots that surrounded the puddle and cast several cleaning and drying charms on himself. While he wasn’t overly fastidious, he wasn’t willing to slog around with a pound of swamp muck in his shorts any longer than absolutely necessary.

Once clean, and having checked himself for leeches and the like, he pumped a bit of chakra to his feet and set off across the pools of water to begin searching for the others. He had no idea where they were or why that cyclone had landed them there. That’s when he saw a figure in the distance.

“Hey! Hey! Excuse me….Hey!”

He called after them and started to follow, but the figure always stayed just out of reach and never answered.

He realized then he was pelting hell-mell deeper and deeper into the swamp. He was a fool—they’d learned at Hogwarts about a number of creatures that inhabited swamps that used visions of different sorts to lead unwary travelers to their deaths so they could be eaten. They’d learned about such things first year, yet here he was, chasing after a phantasm with all the foresight of a muggle toddler!

He firmly turned his back and retraced his steps back to where he’d landed. He wanted to get as far from the lair of whatever creature wanted to eat him as possible. He’d try to locate the others and round them up and then they’d get out of here.

He made his way around a particularly thick tree trunk and came face to face with the figure he’d been chasing earlier.

It was a face he’d never expected to see again. So startled was he, he lost his footing for a second and stumbled backwards, nearly tripping over a root in the process.

“Tom Riddle! What are you doing here? Not only should you be dead, you’re not even from this world!”

The figure said nothing. He looked rather like the part of his soul that had inhabited the diary, though there were differences—which wasn’t so surprising, really. He’d seen that particular piece of soul go through a metamorphosis through the picture he’d made over the year he’d been undoing Voldemort’s horcruxes. All the pieces that had stayed had changed and morphed, until there was only one left. The various rotting, melting and snaky incarnations had disappeared one by one, the humanish but still odd ones had disappeared next. All that had been left in the end were the kid and the teenager. Sirius had destroyed the picture before he could remove the last, but then he hadn’t needed it. The last one had been in him, and it had been taken care of by a combination of anti-obliviation potion, and a weird Nordic ritual the goblins had done.
He’d been rather surprised by how empty he’d felt afterwards; surprised—and disgusted at himself. This was his parents’ murderer, the man who had terrorized the wizarding world for years, tortured and killed so many people. Knowing that hadn’t made the emptiness any less real.

He knew, logically, that having a soul bond with someone for nearly the whole of your life to date had to have some sort of long term consequences.

He also knew that while yes, it had indeed been Tom Riddle—Lord Voldemort—that had killed his parents and all, it had only been a small shard of the whole that had done so; a small, insane, murderous part.

In the process of undoing the horcruxes, he’d gotten to know the man/boy in front of him. He’d seen all the most intimate details of his life, from the inside.

It had been pretty horrifying for the most part. No one should know what it was like to be so broken and crazed—the loss of humanity, the skewed perceptions and lack of common sense, morality, or positive emotions.

The making of a horcrux was known as the ‘darkest art’ for a good reason—and the idiot in front of him had made seven of the damned things. From the time he was fifteen months old, his mind, magic and soul had been intimately twined with those of the wizard in front of him.

To say his feelings for Tom Riddle were complicated was putting it mildly.

Sirius, Remus, Barty, Dora, Adeline, the goblins—everyone who knew about the horcruxes, knew that Harry used to be one, had congratulated him and swamped him in teary hugs when the piece of soul in his forehead—the last one—had undone. Once he’d recovered from the pain and weakness, he’d felt relieved. It was over, and now all that was left was to get on with the rest of his life—and it would be glorious.

It wasn’t until later, after that first bout of euphoria was over that he realized he could feel Voldemort’s absence like an empty spot in his heart, all the time. He imagined it must be rather like losing a limb. Didn’t they say amputees got phantom pains from missing limbs, because your brain kept looking for something that should be there?

It was something he’d never spoken about to anyone—they would worry and fret and look at him with pity—or worse, loathing. So far as he’d been able to determine, no other two wizards in all the history of magic had ever been connected like they had, and so no one could really understand how he felt. All they would see is that he was missing his parents’ murderer, and despise him for it.

If only it were that simple.
When they’d separated, Tom Riddle had taken a little piece of him with him, and left a part of himself behind, even if their souls weren’t technically fused any longer. It had been a year now, and until this moment, he didn’t think he’d realized how strange it still was that he was gone.

It wasn’t quite like looking in a mirror—they didn’t actually look all that much alike. He was taller, for one. His face was a bit longer, his lips a bit thinner. Tom Riddle had brown eyes to Harry’s green, and his hair was wavy, where Harry’s was straight, though it tended to stick up every which way when it was short.
Harry was born in midsummer and was a Gryffindor, Tom in midwinter and a Slytherin. They were both half-bloods, both orphans, both parselmouths, both students of Hogwarts, both gathered their fellow students around them to try to change the world. So alike and yet so different—Tom was the yin to his yang, and he hadn’t been quite the same since he killed him with healing.

It was strange to think they’d never met face to face but once, and even then it was only a small fraction of the man present at the time. It was the night he’d killed Harry’s parents and left him an orphan. The closest they’d gotten to being in the same location afterwards was that Harry had gathered up all the receptacles that held pieces of the man’s soul—and yet, no family, friend, lover or enemy would ever be as close to him, no matter how long he lived.

It was sort of depressing when you thought about it.

Without really thinking about it, he reached out to touch the boy in front of him, only to have him disappear like mist before his eyes. That’s when he realized he could hear someone calling his name.

He shook off his topsy-turvy emotions and shoved everything to the side for the moment, and climbed up the nearest tree to get a better vantage point.

There! In the distance, he could see Aang, Sokka, Toph and Katara stumbling through the swamp.

“Over here! Stay where you are, I’ll come to you.”

“Harry!”

They indulged in a group hug when they were all reunited, and then climbed up on a wide tree branch to exchange notes, and figure out what they were going to do next. It was growing dark, and they could already hear the swamp coming to life around them.

“I saw Yue” Sokka admitted in a small voice. “I must have chased her though half the swamp. She led me to the others.”

“I thought I saw my mom…which is bizarre, because I’m blind, and I’ve never actually seen her…but I did see her, and I know it was her. It was kinda freaky.” Toph admitted.

“I saw my friend Kuzon. I asked Bumi about him, but he said he died a while back. I didn’t recognize him at first…he was an old man, just like Bumi.” Aang sniffled.

“Katara, how about you?”

Katara crossed her arms and hunched in on herself.

“I saw mom.” She whispered. “I chased her and chased her and she disappeared when I finally caught up.”

“Harry?”

“I saw a guy I knew who died recently.”

There was no way he was going to try explaining who Tom Riddle really was to him—it was his life and he still found it complicated.

“You…don’t think my mom is dead, do you?” Toph asked in a small voice.
“Don’t borrow trouble. We have no idea what the visions mean or why particular people were chosen.” Katara was quick to assure her, taking her hand.

“I’ll ask Hedwig when she returns, and you can dictate a letter to send to her, okay?” Harry offered.

Toph still looked freaked, but some of the tension did ease from her shoulders and face. Sokka threw an arm over her shoulder. It was a mark of how worried she was that she didn’t punch him, or pull away.

“It’s getting dark. We should probably try to get some sleep. Do you think this branch is wide enough for me to set up the tent? I really don’t want to wander through this place in the dark, even on the carpet—there’s too many hanging vines and such.”

“I’m worried about Appa and Momo.”

“We all are. If they haven’t shown up by morning, I’ll do that locator I mentioned and we should go right to them.”

It took some maneuvering, but Harry did manage to set up the tent there on the tree branch, held in place by a nice, strong sticking charm. He re-exited after everyone else was inside and set up some basic wards to keep away animals, insects and the like. Once back inside, he sent the girls off to the bathroom to clean up and showed them the ‘washing machine’—basically a box with a door that allowed you to put your clothes inside and then performed a variety of cleaning and sprucing charms on the clothes so you could retrieve them when you were done your bath. While they were doing that, he got started on dinner for everyone—stir-fried tofu and vegetables for Aang and heated up beef stew for the rest of them.

When the girls came back out, Harry was taken aback for a moment by how different Toph looked. She was just wearing the green shirt and shorts she normally wore, without the yellow tunic that normally went overtop, and had left off her headband, ankle and wristbands. Her hair was down, and still wet from her bath, and framing her face, rather than in a big bun with her fringe covering most of her face like she normally wore it. Katara’s hair was down and loose as well, and already drying into a loose riot of waves and curls. She was a very beautiful girl; he really couldn’t blame poor Aang for looking like he’d been poleaxed, before carefully averting his eyes.

“Hey Toph…can I play with your hair?” Harry asked cheerfully to distract everyone.

Toph turned her sightless gaze towards him with a ‘what the hell’ look on her face.

“Say what?”

“Please? I’ll put it in a French braid—it will not only look nice, it will keep your hair out of your way…and if I do it tight enough, you won’t have to really mess with it for a couple of days.”

“What’s a French braid?”

“It’s…well, I don’t know how to really explain it. It would be easier to show you.”

“You’re a hairdresser now?” Sokka wondered.

“A couple of girls I go to school with taught me how to do it. I have a lot of female friends. I kept getting sucked into their gossip fests; it was easier to deal with if I had something to do with my
hands.”

Sokka just nodded; it made perfect sense to him.

“So, can I?”

“I don’t know…”

“Go on, Toph. You might like it.” Katara urged.

Toph rubbed her stomach when it gurgled. “I’m really hungry though…”

“I can mess with your hair while you eat. It will be easier to do while it’s wet anyway.”

Toph huffed and slumped into place.

“Fine.” She growled as she pulled her bowl closer to her and started wolfing it down.

She could feel all of them watching her while Harry combed and pulled at her hair till her scalp was tingling—she supposed it was lucky she had experience with her mother’s hairdresser, or she probably would have bopped him by now. He was actually a lot gentler than that old biddy ever was.

She felt strangely vulnerable without her curtain of hair hiding her face—it was different when she was home; no one really ever looked at her there.

Thinking of home made her think of the weird vision of her mom, and her thoughts skittered sideways. Her mom had to be okay, she just had to.

“There, done!” Harry announced, before rising to go eat his own dinner.

“Well, who knew there was such a cutie hiding under there.” Sokka cooed before pinching her cheek.

Toph growled, smacked his hand away and then punched him in the leg.

“OW!”

“It looks nice, Toph. You should wear your hair like that more often. We can see your face like this.” Katara spoke over Sokka’s whimpers.

“You look real pretty Toph.” Aang added quietly.

Damn it. She could feel herself blushing…and stupid Aang was sitting on the other side of the table where she couldn’t reach him easily to bop him! All she could do was cross her arms and scowl in his general direction.

“What? It was a complement!”

She reached up and gingerly felt along her head, trying to get some idea of what had been done to her. All her hair had been pulled back and folded under itself somehow along her skull, and then ended in a regular braid that hung with unaccustomed weight between her shoulder blades.

“If either of you guys wants to clean up the bathroom’s free.”

Toph relaxed a bit once all the attention was taken off of her.
“Good idea. I have slime in my pants. It’s dried now and starting to itch.”

“Ugh! Sokka, too much information.” Katara groaned.

Harry stacked up the bowls and took them away to be washed while Sokka and Aang hurried off to the bathroom.

“I guess we’ll turn in? We want to get an early start.” Toph suggested.

“Goodnight, ladies.”

“Azula…we shouldn’t be going in people’s houses.”

“Haven’t you ever been curious how peasants live? We now have a perfect opportunity to find out, without having to deal with any actual peasants.”

Mai sighed and followed after the princess, who began peeking in closets and cabinets immediately upon entering.

“It’s so…small. Stifling really. How can anyone live like this?”

“Very easily, I would imagine, if it’s what you’re used to.”

“How curious…there’s no food in any of the cabinets.”

“Maybe they needed to go shopping.”

Azula disappeared into the nearest bedroom and began opening up the closets.

“There’s no clothing either.”

“Maybe this house was unoccupied.”

“Maybe you all were duped. Very clever, for peasants. They saved themselves the trouble of being hunted down by making your father kick them out. Did no one notice they were carrying all their belongings with them?”

“They weren’t; they were just stumbling through the streets, covered in purple spots and moaning.”

“Hmmmm. It must have been a two-stage operation. They did have earthbenders among them—so belongings out the side of the mountains, peasants out the front gates with permission.”

Mai jumped a bit when a sudden knock sounded on the door.

“Lady Mai? A visitor for you.”

“Visitor?” Mai muttered as she headed for the door. Azula followed and leaned herself comfortably against the nearest doorway so she could watch. It could prove to be amusing.

Mai snatched open the door and froze, her eyes widening just a bit. For her, it was the same as another person shrieking and flailing in shock.

“Zuko?”

“Hello Mai. Long time no see.”
They just stared at one another for a moment, drinking in the changes time had wrought since they’d last seen each other. Zuko reached out, and Mai found her hands in his without consciously reaching for him.

Zuko gave her hands a gentle squeeze and let go.

“You remember my uncle?”

Mai pulled herself together and offered a short bow Iroh’s way.

“General Iroh. You’re looking well.”

“Thank you Mai. I must say, you have certainly grown up into quite the lovely young lady.”

“Thank you.”

Zuko slouched against the doorjamb and his eyes flickered around the small house they were all in, before landing on Azula with a smirk.

“Still curious about peasants?”

“Simply investigating.” Azula denied. “All the citizens seem to have played a trick on the governor.”

She explained her findings, and Mai filled in what she had seen of the mass exodus. When they were done, Zuko and Iroh exchanged a glance.

“Looks like the avatar has already been and gone.”

“The avatar? He was here?”

“Yeah, that’s why I’m here. I’ve been tracking him and his group. We were at a village called Gaipan about a week ago. All the citizens from there disappeared as well, along with their belongings, though they used a fake spirit attack, not an epidemic. I take it King Bumi is gone?”

“No. He’s still here. We have him in custody.” Mai disagreed.

Zuko frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense. Why would he leave his friend but take everyone else?”

“He’s probably disgusted with him. He surrendered, you know.” Azula said dismissively.

“I guess…I suppose that would explain it.”

“Did anything else of note happen recently?” Iroh wondered.

“My mother, brother and I were nearly squashed by a boulder yesterday. I suppose that was the avatar as well. He doesn’t have very good aim. It landed yards ahead of us.”

“Unlikely. The avatar is probably the one who knocked the boulder away from you. They seem to be careful of the non-combatants. Our soldiers are getting slaughtered left, right and center. The ordinary citizens, engineers and factory workers were just scared off so they could destroy the buildings. Any earth kingdom citizens in their keeping were absconded with.”

“Just what all have you been up to since I’ve seen you last?”

“Last?” Mai echoed, while looking between the two of them.
“Following the avatar.”

“Still, it sounds like you’ve had quite the adventure. You should stay for a bit and tell us all about it.”

“No, I really should get going. Now that I know the avatar has already left…”

“How do you know that?” Mai wondered.

“There wouldn’t be anything left of this place if he stuck around after getting the citizens out.”

“I want to know more about these bases you’ve mentioned.”

“Az…you know as well as I do that I’m not even really supposed to be here. I’d prefer not be hunted down for breaking my banishment if it’s alright with you.”

“Don’t be such a goose. Father is hardly going to hunt you down for sticking around long enough to fill us in.”

Zuko just looked at her and shook his head, before turning to Mai and kissing her lightly on the cheek.

“It was good to see you again.”

Mai blushed like she used to when they were kids playing in the palace gardens, averted her eyes and mumbled ‘you too.’

Azula crossed her arms and pouted, just a bit. She hated not getting her way. She continued scowling and kept her arms crossed even when he engulfed her in a hug and dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

“Take care of yourself, Az.” He mumbled into her hair.

Iroh smiled avuncularly at them both and sketched a small bow, and then they were gone as quickly as they had arrived.

They were both quiet once the door had closed behind them. Mai turned away, and a reached a hand up to touch the cheek Zuko had kissed. A tiny, almost not-there smile quirked her lips for just a moment.

“Still cukoo for Zuzu, I see. He was unexpectedly smooth with you. That was a far cry from knocking you into the fountain like he did when we were kids.”

“He only did that because you put an apple on my head and set it on fire.” Mai reminded her. “But I see what you mean. He did grow up quite a bit, didn’t he?”

“I notice you didn’t say anything about his new look.”

“His scar, you mean? I barely noticed it.”

“You should probably get your eyes checked. It’s rather hard to miss.”

“He’s still Zuko.”
Azula rolled her eyes and mimed gagging herself.

Mai slanted a look towards her, still expressionless but for the faint glint of curiosity in her eyes.

“I don’t recall you two being so chummy.”

“What? I just wanted to know about the bases he mentioned.”

“You wanted him to stay…and not for me. When did you see him last?”

Azula shrugged and wandered casually through the room.

“About a month or so ago; he was staying at the eastern air temple. His ship got commandeered for that disastrous North Pole siege and he and uncle Iroh got stranded there. He seems to have gone native. Dum Dum probably thought he was going to be stuck there for the rest of his life…but no, his ship and crew not only survived, they managed to rescue some of our soldiers. I went there to find his crew to question them about what happened.”

“How’d you end up hanging out with Zuko? You said it yourself, he wasn’t even there.”

“Why are you harping on this? He was right there, it just seemed polite to say hello.”

“It must have been a heck of a hello, given how chummy you two are now.”

Azula snorted and looked at her like she was crazy.

“That’s just Zuzu being his usual dum-dum self. Personally, I think he’s spent too much time with his tea-loving-kookiness. It was probably a mistake to let him go along when poor Zuzu was at such an impressionable age.”

“You missed him.”

Azula started laughing, but Mai just sighed and rolled her eyes in response.

“It’s alright to miss people, you know, and he is your brother. Tom-tom annoys the hell out of me, but I’d still be sad if he were gone.”

“We should go do something. Hanging around this place will be dreadfully dull, don’t you think?”

Mai sighed in annoyance, but allowed the abrupt change of subject.

“What about your entourage? Didn’t you say you were sent here to get you out of the way?”

“Exactly. They’re hardly going to be in a hurry to report to father that they misplaced me, are they? Do you have any mongoose dragons?”

“Yeah, we do. They were brought along because of all the mountains, not that they needed them since the stupid king here just surrendered without a fight.”

“Excellent. We should go visit Ty Lee. Maybe after seeing her in action I’ll be able to fathom what she was thinking when she ran away to join the circus of all things.”

“I don’t know why you were so shocked. We both know what a free spirit she’s always been. She loves it there. Can’t you just be happy for her?”

“Happy that she’s throwing her life away?”
Mai studied her a moment.

“You miss her too, and you hate it.”

Azula gave her a look that was equal parts boredom and disdain.

“Honestly Mai, when did you turn into such a sap?”

“We’re your friends, right? Is it really so terrible if you missed us?”

“Think highly of yourself, don’t you?”

“You were sent off to get you out of the way. I really doubt your father was so thoughtful and considerate as to send you here, which means you chose the destination.”

“I simply thought it would be more interesting than the back woods farming village he was originally going to send me to. My mistake.”

“I missed you too, you know. Both of you. Not all the time, just once in a while, when something happens that I know you’d make a cutting remark about, or when I see something cute and cuddly that I know Ty Lee would be cooing over. It’s not a big deal.”

“Goodness, we really do need to get you out of this place. Which way to the stables?”

Mai followed after her with a world weary sigh.

“We’re going to end up camping out, aren’t we? I hate camping.”

“You hate everything, Mai, stop complaining.”

“Hedwig! You’re back!”

The white owl flew around Harry’s head, flapping and hooting.

“What is it? Come here and moment and show me.”

Harry peered into her eyes a moment and then launched her back in the air. “Show me.”

“What is it?”

“Some guys wearing leaves and loincloths caught Appa and Momo. She saw them on the river while she was on her way in here. They seem to be planning to eat them by the looks of it. Hedwig tried to help them, but she almost got caught herself, so she came and got us instead.”

He steered the carpet through the trees as fast as he could—which wasn’t nearly as easy as it sounded. Not only were the trees packed pretty closely together, there were hanging vines everywhere. Hedwig, being much smaller, had a much easier time of it.

After travelling awhile, they finally came to the river. Hedwig took off down it, and as they rounded the bend they could see Appa, trussed up, and being hauled along behind a canoe that was being steered by a leaf-wearing yokel waving his arms around. There was a second yokel in the boat, who had a writhing bag at his feet.
“GIVE BACK APPA and MOMO! NOW!” Aang growled as he launched himself from the carpet, staff at the ready. He swept the two men overboard, and then cut Appa loose. Appa rose into the air with a happy groan. Hedwig flew near the moving bag in the boat and clacked her beak to get Aang’s attention so he would free Momo as well.

Harry would have done so, but he had his own problems. The guys Aang had swept overboard started pelting them with water. The carpet wasn’t anywhere near as maneuverable as his broom, especially with four people on it. Katara stood up and called water of her own to start pelting them back.

That’s when a swamp monster- a mass of slime and tangled vines with a masklike face-- rose up out of the surrounding trees and started attacking as well.

“What'S GOING ON?” Toph demanded as he turned the carpet to avoid another water attack.

“Waterbenders who aren’t wearing nearly enough clothing, and a swamp monster. You know, the usual.”

“I HATE BEING BLIND!”

“Sokka, if I get you close enough, do you think you could whack the mask and break it?”

“Sure…why?”

“Usually, in a case like this, if there’s something that looks oddly out of place with the rest, it’s a focus of some sort. Things might work different here, but it’s worth a shot.”

“Can do.”

“Hold on.”

Sokka leapt out and swung his sword around, bisecting the mask in half, before landing in the water with a splash. Katara and Aang continued pelting it with water blades, but it seemed Harry’s guess was right. The swamp monster began oozing away, to reveal a fat man in another loincloth with a leaf on his head.

The tableau froze for a moment while the guy in the swamp monster studied them each in turn. His eyes widened when he got to Aang.

“Well gol-ly. You’re the avatar!”

“What’dyu say, Huu?” asked one of the yokels as he climbed out of the water, pulling leeches off his elbows as he did so.

“Y’all heard me. That there’s the avatar. Why’re you attacking our swamp?”

“We weren’t attacking the swamp, were were attacking these guys because they stole Appa and Momo!”

Hedwig shrieked and landed on Harry’s shoulder, bristling.

“And tried to take Hedwig too!”

“Well garsh, we didn’t know they was anyone’s pets. We jes figured we was eating good tonight!” the second yokel complained as he climbed out of the river.
“Yeah, y’all didn’t have to be so harsh. Y’all coulda jes asked all polite like.”

“That young fella there was chopping at the swamp earlier” Huu disagreed, pointing to Sokka. “I’m the protector of this here swamp. We don’t like people messing about with it.”

“We never even planned on coming in here. We were flying by overhead and a cyclone knocked us all out of the sky!” Sokka complained. “I’m not going to apologize for doing what I had to to get out of there.”

Huu shook his head and gave Sokka a reproachful look.

“This here swamp is all one organism. You hurt part of it, you hurt the whole thing. It’s all connected. However, seeing as you’re kin to us, and weren’t actually meaning no harm, I suppose we can forgive y’all this once…so long as you don’t go doing it no more.”

“Sure, no problem.” Sokka deadpanned.

“Well then, now that’s all settled, we should have ourselves a hootenanny!”

“Yee-haaw!” the guys from the boat both cheered.

Harry could feel Toph shaking with laughter from where she was gripping his shirt from behind.

“I’ll say this much…life sure got interesting after I met you guys.”

The swamp tribe’s village was a simple place of wooden shacks on stilts to protect against sudden flooding. All the folks of the tribe, male and female, wore a giant leaf on their head as a hat. The men wore green loincloths with knee length shorts beneath, with wrappings on their lower legs and arms, and armbands on their upper arms. The women wore strapless tops and knee length skirts with chestplates and shin guards made of bark.

In the center of the village were some oddities, a group of four dressed in bright colors, with flowers in their hair. One of the men was strumming an instrument, and the others were…dancing, and by that he meant flailing and gyrating. They all appeared to be very, very stoned.

“Whoah-ho, hey there! More visitors, huh? I knew this swamp seemed friendly.” The guy with the instrument greeted them cheerfully.

“Uh, hi. You guys don’t look like you’re from around here.”

“Us? Nah. We’re nomads! We go wherever the wind takes us.”

“Really? I’m a nomad!” Aang replied.

“Nice ta meet’cha. I’m Chong, this here’s my wife Lily. Over there is Moku and Rosie.”

“Heeey.” The other two waved.

“Whoa…you’re like, blind, aren’t you?”

Harry, Sokka, Aang and Katara all glared at him. Toph just crossed her arms.

“Yeah. Got a problem with that?”
“Oh, no. It’s just weird, you know? I just learned a new song a few weeks ago about a blind girl, that’s all.”

“Really.”

“Yeah? Wanna hear it? It’s a beautiful tale of love that transcends war. I heard people saying it was like Oma and Shu for a new generation.”

“It’s funny you should mention them. We just went through the cave of the two lovers a few days ago.” Sokka noted.

“Awesome. Trust in love, brother. It will always get you through.”

“So, let’s hear your song.”

“Cool. Let me see…how did it go again? Oh, right!” He began happily strumming at his instrument, and after a few bars he began to sing.

Two lovers,
forbidden from one another
A war divides their people,
and a mountain divides them apart.

Toph huffed and crossed her arms.
“Oh wait…my bad. That was totally the lyrics to ‘Secret Tunnel’. Hang on…oh, yeah…

A hundred years of war
Divide their people and their nations
But love is a hearty flower
That can bloom
even in the midst of battle.
And love is a special ungent
that can heal the worst of wounds
Blind girl…Burnt boy…
Found each other in the midst of heartbreak
Blind girl…Burnt boy
Together they search for peace
Where can two such unlucky lovers go
When all the world is turned against them?
Blind girl…Burnt boy
Search for a place that love can grow!

“That is so bloody awesome.” Harry managed to say through the laughter he was doing his best to suppress. “I knew it was going to become a ballad. I just knew it!”

“What are you…” Katara trailed off and her face blanched in horrified disbelief. “No. No it just can’t…”

“What are you guys talking about?” Toph wondered.

“Who do we know that could be described as a ‘burnt boy’?”

“Just Zuko, I guess…but I still don’t…” Aang began.
“No fricken way!” Sokka groaned.
“Zuko’s burnt?” Toph asked curiously.

“Almost half his face…well, closer to a third I guess, if you want to be technical. Yeah, his one eye is barely a slit because the scar tissue is so thick, and his ear is a bit mangled. It surrounds his eye, ear and crosses his forehead and probably a good forth of the top of his head.”

“Training accident?”

“I seriously doubt it. It looked to me like someone held a flaming fist to his face. Frankly, he’s lucky he has sight in his one eye.”

“Oh please.” Katara snarled with infinite disdain. “He’s the crown prince of Fire Nation. Who would dare?”

“Did you forget the part where he’s banished, and had been for a couple of years before anyone knew Aang was still alive? But you’re right, who would dare? The only person high ranked enough to do such a thing with impunity would be the Fire Lord himself—his father, in case that part slipped your notice.”

“You know, this is unbelievable.” Toph growled.

“I know…how could someone’s own father” Sokka murmured.

“Not that…though that sucks in a big way. I’m totally gonna pound that Fire Lord for doing it when I see him”

“You’re blind.” Chong pointed out helpfully.

“You know what I mean! No, I was talking about the song. I get a song written about me, and instead of being immortalized for my truly awesome and stupendous earthbending prowess…I’m always going to be remembered as the blind girl who got kidnapped!”

“Hey…you guys sound like you know the blind girl and the burnt boy.”

Toph sighed and hung her head, then stomped the ground to make a small rounded bump rise up under Chong and drop him back down to the ground.

Chong’s eyes widened and he stood up unsteadily.

“Hey, you guys probably shouldn’t keep sitting on the ground there. There’s seems to be some naughty gophers in there.”

Harry fell over laughing.

“Sir! We’ve spotted the bison!”

“Let me see.” He grabbed the telescope and trained it on the white dot in the distance. He could see the avatar seated on the beast’s head, the water tribe siblings, Toph and the other airbender/spirit, whatever he was, in the saddle. The lemur flew alongside for short hops and circled back into the saddle. The white owl was nowhere to be seen.

“So, they really were in the Foggy Swamp all this time…why though? And where the heck are they going now? The only thing in that direction is miles of trackless desert.”

“So, Prince Zuko…do we try to follow them?”
“What else can we do? I’m glad now that you asked for a couple of mongoose dragons before we left Omashu—that will certainly make following them easier.”

“I was getting tired of stomping all over Earth Kingdom, nephew.” Iroh sighed.

The mongoose dragons were unloaded, the ship given orders to resupply and let the men have a bit of shore leave outside the war zone while they waited to hear from them again. Iroh and Zuko set off at a fast clip, following the bison, which was already little more than a small white dot on the far horizon.

“You were right, Aang, those musical gophers were cute.” Harry said.

“I told you they would be.”

“Is that the oasis? It doesn’t look like much.” Sokka asked.

“It’s the right spot…a lot sure changes in a hundred years.”

“Well, we’re here, we might as well stop like we planned to.” Katara said with some disappointment.

“Our vacation choices suck.” Sokka sighed.

“Well…Omashu didn’t work out, but we did have that…interesting…trip into the swamp.” Toph offered.

“Where the men wear far too little clothing and everyone eats giant bugs. Yeah. Wonderful place, that.” Sokka quipped sarcastically.

“The nomads were fun.” Aang objected.

“I can’t wait to tell Zuko about our song.” Toph snickered. “When the war is over though, I’m definitely hiring someone to write a song about what an awesome earthbender I am.”

“Yeah, you do that Toph.” Katara deadpanned while rolling her eyes.

“Do you think my parents got my letter yet?”

“Or that Suki got mine? Why wasn’t she on Kyoshi?”

“They should have. You told them they could send a reply back with Hedwig. I’m sure she’ll be back soon.” Harry replied absently.

“What are you doing, anyway?” Sokka asked curiously.

“I’m making a bracelet for Toph.”

“You’re what?” Aang called from his spot up front.


Katara frowned at the bracelet and though she didn’t say so, he could see she was wondering why he was making jewelry for Toph, but not her.
“I don’t know if it will work like I’m hoping, but I’m trying to make a device that will sort of stretch her earth sense so she can ‘see’ a bit even when she’s not touching the ground. It’s an experiment of sorts.”

Sokka scooched closer so he could see.

“Is that…writing on there?”

“It’s a special kind of writing. They’re called runes. Each one represents something, and their meaning and function changes depending on the order they’re put in. I’ve been messing about the last few days trying to figure out how to put what I wanted in terms the runes would interpret correctly. I think I have the sequence right, so now I’m just embedding it on the stone here and putting it in a form she can wear.”

He checked over the stone, following the sequence from beginning to end, and made sure the runes were in the correct order, and more importantly that each one was formed correctly. Weird things could happen when there was a mistake anywhere in the sequence, because the magic didn’t know what you wanted of it. Everything looked good, so he added the activation rune and pumped a bit of magic into it to make it spark.

“They look like they’re on fire.”

“That’s just them activating. Hey, Toph, ready to experiment?”

He crawled over to where Toph was seated and handed the thing to her. It was a simple thin piece of malachite for the band, with a larger flat oval of the same making up the rest. The oval was inscribed front and back with runes laying out the pathway for a supersensory charm. It had actually come out rather pretty, with its alternating bands of light, dark and darker green. Better yet, since it was technically ‘earth’ she could bend the bracelet on and off herself, and tighten it to fit, so long as she left the oval with the runes alone. He explained all that to her while she ran her hands over it.

“Cool. Well, let’s give it a test drive, shall we?”

She bent the stone into an armband, which she wrapped around her upper left arm. Harry grinned when her mouth fell open slightly and she smiled.

“It doesn’t extend as far as my earth sense, and it’s not as clear…but I can ‘see’ the saddle and everyone in it.” She lifted her face slightly to where Momo was wheeling excitedly overhead. “I can see Momo flying, sort of. Hey, hear that, Twinkletoes? You’re not going to be able to just flit away from me anymore!”

“That’s great Toph.” Aang replied. He managed to sound sincere, even though his face was slightly pained. Toph, much like her element, could be rather relentless.

She chortled and punched Harry hard in the arm, which he took in the spirit it was given.

“Next stop, Misty Palms Oasis!”

The Misty Palms Oasis was a disappointment, to say the least. It was a small village on the very edge of the trackless desert that made up the center of the whole Earth Kingdom. There was a wall around
it, and a handful of adobe huts inside, and not much else. It was hot, it was dry, it was dusty. There was a glacier in the center, but it was a small, sad little thing, though they were told there was still a big hunk of ice still preserved beneath the desert floor. It had been greatly reduced over the years as chunks were cut off to make the fruity drinks that were the town’s specialty.

“Well, we’re here. I guess we should try the town specialty before heading back out. Let’s head to the cantina.”

“Sounds good. It’s really hot and dry out here.”

Harry dug out a scroll and popped out a small barrel, which he handed to Aang.

“Here. Make sure Appa gets a drink before we leave him out here. He must be sweltering under all that fur.”

“What is it?”

“Just water.”

Appa guzzled down the water rather gratefully, as did Momo. They left the two of them in the little shade provided by the back of the cantina and headed inside.

Harry took back the empty barrel and tucked it away in his pouch. It could be reused, he just needed to remember to refill it and make a new storage seal for it.

The inside of the cantina was filled with a seedy looking mix, who eyed all of them assessingly before turning away. A group of travel-worn kids carrying no obvious baggage didn’t make for good marks. He and Sokka, with their swords, got slightly more assessing looks, but they were dismissed as well—they had two youngsters with them, two young ladies, and the world was a dangerous place.

They ordered fruity iced drinks for everyone and found a seat at one of the dusty tables. Katara was obviously ill at ease, though Aang and Toph seemed to take the novelty of it all in stride. Toph even made herself at home enough to put her dusty feet up on the table while she sipped her drink.

“Mmm. Mango. Yum. I think it might actually have been worth the trip out here just for this.” Toph decided.

“I thought the show was pretty good too. I’ve never seen a bartender chop ice and fruit for drinks with double swords before.” Sokka added, getting a speculative look on his face.

“Sokka, if you’re going to try it, do us all a favor and practice far away from us.” Katara sighed.

“It was just a thought.”

“So, where to next? This place didn’t quite work out as a vacation spot.” Aang wondered.

“I don’t know. Anyone have any ideas?”

While they were thinking over their options, a guy dressed in tan from head to foot, who looked about ready to head out on safari, entered the cantina. He was laden down with scrolls and canteens and a bedroll.

“Back again, professor? Don’t tell me you’re heading out again?”

“I’m afraid so. I have a good feeling this time.”
“Seems a lot of trouble for a library.”

“Not just any library! The legendary library of Wan Shi Tong himself!”

“Still a library. I’m not much for books.”

“It’s a treasure trove! The crown jewel! The most sought prize of knowledge seekers everywhere!”

“Suit yourself. You won’t catch me heading out there.”

Harry put on his best smile and moved to intercept the man.

“Hello, professor was it? I couldn’t help but overhear…”

“Oh, hello. Yes, Professor Zei, Ba Sing Se University, at your service.”

“Pleased to meet you, Professor. I’m Harry. Would you like to join us? I’d love to hear more about your quest.”

“Oh, well sure. I’m always willing to discuss my work with fellow knowledge seekers.”

“Another drink for the professor?” Harry called to the bartender, before leading him to the table.

“Very kind of you, thanks.”

He stopped dead when he spotted Aang. “Why…you’re an air nomad! How fascinating. I didn’t realize any of your people were still around. Why…this is marvelous! I’ve been to all the temples and documented the sights, but I’ve never actually had the opportunity to speak with any of your people. I have so many questions for you.”

“Oh, well, okay, I guess.”

“What are you a professor of, exactly?” Katara wondered.

“Exotic cultures. I’ve been all over the world, hunting down lost civilizations and documenting current ones outside Ba Sing Se.”

“Really? Do you have a map of Fire Nation?” Sokka wondered.

“Sadly, no. Given the climate the last hundred years, Fire Nation is one place I’ve never been. They’re not exactly welcoming to outsiders, and given the war… no. I’ve been pretty much everywhere but.”

“Damn.”

“So, tell us more about this library you’re looking for.” Harry prompted.

“Oh, the legendary library of Wan Shi Tong. He’s a knowledge spirit. He has helpers that comb the world for knowledge, which he amassed into a huge library. The legend has it that he brought his library out of the spirit world so he could share his gathered knowledge for the betterment of humanity. Over time, the area where it was put became the desert. I’m sure it’s still out there somewhere, but the exact location has been lost to time. Even if all that’s left are remnants of the once great library, it would be a priceless find!”

He dug out one of the many scrolls he was laden down with and unrolled it. It showed the whole of Earth Kingdom, centered on the desert that made up the interior. Half the desert was marked with the
route of his previous forays out into it. He’d covered roughly half of it, from the west to the center.

“I’ve been making regular trips out there to search for it over the last twenty years or so.”

“Wow. That’s dedication.”

“Like I said, it would be a priceless find.”

Harry and Sokka exchanged a glance and Sokka nodded.

“We could help you search. We have a flying bison. I bet you could search a lot more area from the air.”

“A flying bison! How remarkable! One hasn’t been seen in decades! Where is it?”

“Around back in the shade. He’s furry, so it’s a bit hot here for him.”

“It’ll be better once we get in the air, come on!” Aang cheered.

“They’re heading deeper into the desert, uncle.” Zuko muttered unhappily.

“I can see that as well as you can, nephew.”

“Why are they heading into the desert?”

“Maybe the avatar wants to learn sandbending.”

“We’re going to have to stock up on water and get hats or something if we’re going to follow them.”

“I was afraid you were going to say something like that.”
For a lost mystical library it sure is busy around here.

Chapter Summary

The gaang and Professor Zei head out to the desert to search for Wan Shi Tong’s lost library, and have a couple of reunions along the way.

“That looks like it must be it.” Aang pointed.

“It doesn’t look like much.” Harry noted.

“Of course, it all makes sense now. The desert sands covered it! That’s why the huge, sprawling complex written of in the histories disappeared so completely!”

Aang brought Appa in for a landing next to the single tower they had found (with the help of Harry’s locator spell) sticking out of the sand. While they were climbing down, a fox with a scroll in its mouth climbed up the tower to the one opening and hopped inside.

“One of Wan Shi Tong’s knowledge gathering kitsune spirits! This is really it.” Professor Zei breathed reverently. “It’s right here in front of us, the answer to all my prayers.”

“All right, I’ll get everyone inside to look around, and then I’ll be along in a bit.” Harry decided.

“Why? What are you going to be doing?” Katara asked curiously.

“I’m going to come back out and rig up some sort of shelter for Appa, and leave him some water.”

“I’ll stay out here with him.”

“Don’t you want to come inside?”

“Reading doesn’t do much for me.” Toph scoffed while waving a hand in front of her face.

“It’s supposed to be a huge, sprawling complex. I thought you might like to explore the building a bit.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Suit yourself.”

Harry loaded everyone on the carpet and flew them inside. The professor was rather amazed by the carpet; Harry could hear him pelting Aang with questions about airbending as he headed back outside.

“Can you bend the sand the way you do dirt and rocks?” he asked Toph curiously.

“I’m sure I could with practice, but at the moment, no. I can’t even really see properly. It’s like standing in a big bowl of pudding.”

“Wow, that sucks. Alright, stand back a bit.”
Harry drew his trusty holly wand and formed up some of the loose sand into a rough shelter—it looked rather like a shallow cave, with the opening facing the tower, when he was done. Appa shuffled inside and flopped down, happy to get out of the hot sun for a bit.

He made a shallow trough out of some more of the sand and dumped out another of his little barrels of water, but for a bit which he handed off to Toph.

“Alright, we’ll try not to take too long.”

He packed away the carpet and withdrew his broom, and flew into the tower. His friends and the professor were nowhere to be seen.

Once inside the sheer size and scope of the collection the knowledge spirit had gathered could really be seen. Everything was built on a monumental scale, and the rows and rows of books, scrolls and artifacts disappeared into the shadowed distances as far as the eye could see in every direction.

He looked around a bit, with his wand out to provide a bit of extra light, and found signs directing one to the different wings. Oddly, some of the signs were in English.

He shook off that oddity and set off, still on his broom, towards the Fire Nation archives. Given Sokka’s earlier questions to the professor about maps of Fire Nation, he had a feeling that’s where he’d find the others.

He spotted candlelight flickering at the end of the hall. As he approached he could hear voices. He flew in through a couple of double doors into a large room filled with shelves and a long table.

“Sifu Harry! There you are! Look, we found a friend of yours!” Aang called out cheerfully.

Harry frowned at him in confusion and followed his pointing finger to the figure seated at the table, who had been mostly obscured by the figures of Sokka and Katara when he entered. They moved aside, smiling.

Pale skin, dark wavy hair, brown eyes.

He looked to be about fifteen or sixteen—not much older than Harry. He was wearing a plain, loose robe of some soft looking material, dark green with a faint bit of lighter green embroidery around the cuffs and collar. It looked like celtic knotwork made of intertwined snakes.

“You! What are you doing here? I thought you were dead!”

“Nice to see you too Harry.”

Tom Riddle smirked and sat back in his chair looking quite pleased with himself.

“Why the hell did they come all the way out here? What is that tower?”

“Sparky? Is that you?”

“Toph?”
“Ah! The ever-charming Miss Bei Fong! It’s lovely to see you again, my dear. I was ever so relieved to discover that you had not drowned off the side of our ship.”

“You and me both. Hey, Sparky…did you know they wrote a ballad about us?”

“Huh?”

“Eloquent as ever, I see. Hang on. Harry wrote out a copy of it for me so I could taunt you about it when I saw you again.”

“Um, Miss Toph…do you mind terribly if our mongoose dragons get a drink?”

“If Appa doesn’t mind sharing, I don’t care.”

Zuko and Iroh looked at Appa, who just groaned and closed his eyes. The mongoose dragons needed no urging. They surged towards the trough and began greedily licking up water.

“I don’t suppose you have any more water around?” Iroh asked hopefully.

“There might be some in the barrel there.” Toph called from within Appa’s saddle.

“Ah, found it!”

Zuko and Iroh gratefully finished off the water that was left in the barrel, while Toph slid down Appa’s tail with a rolled paper in her hand.

“Here.”

Zuko took it and unrolled it, then his face flushed pink.

Iroh raised an eyebrow and plucked it out of his hands. He looked over it and started laughing.

“What’s funny? I thought the song was corny, not really funny though.”

“I guess you did not realize that your friend added some pictures to his transcript. There’s a lovely rendition of the two of you battling one another at the Earth Rumble, one of my nephew carrying you, and one of the two of you having tea on the deck of the ship. It’s all very inspiring.”

“Are they at least good pictures?”

“Yes, very good likenesses, I would say, though he has myself and the others serenading the two of you, rather than playing Pai Sho.”

Sokka, Katara and Aang looked uncertainly between the two of them.

“Uh…Harry? This guy is a friend of yours, right? It’s just…well, you don’t look too happy to see him.”

Harry landed and put his broom away to give himself a moment to compose himself.

“Remember the vision I had in the swamp? He’s apparently not as dead as I thought. I was just a little surprised.”
“You had a vision about me? Not another prophecy, I hope?” Tom Riddle said casually. Harry knew better. First hint of a possible prophecy signaling his demise and he’d probably start blasting everything in sight with magic.

“Not that kind of vision. We were in a swamp, and it shows you people that are connected to you in some way. Aang saw an old friend, Sokka an old girlfriend who recently died, Katara her mom, I saw you. That’s it.”

“You two keep talking, but what you say makes no sense.”

Harry frowned and looked at Sokka, but then he realized Katara and Aang looked just as freaked.

“Oh…we were speaking English, weren’t we?”

“Yes, we were.”

“That’s just our native language. It’s no biggie.”

“You guys speak a different language? Wow.”

“The English signs out in the library suddenly make much more sense. How long have you been here?”

“How long have you been here?”

“I asked first.”

“A while. I haven’t been keeping track.”

“I’ve been here since a few weeks before autumn equinox, and before you ask, Spring equinox is still a few weeks away. Have you been in the library this entire time?”

“Yes. It was where my gateway let me out. I’ve been organizing everything and making indexes. This place here” he waved his hands to indicate the rows of books surrounding him “was burnt to a crisp. The last mortal to set foot in these halls came looking for a way to defeat his enemies, and he destroyed the entire Fire Nation collection before he left—probably so no one could do the same in return.”

“Was his name Zhao by any chance?”

“You’ll have to ask Wan Shi Tong, I never met the guy.”

“Well, if it was him…and I strongly suspect it was, burning this collection didn’t do him any good. He was run through the chest with a giant icicle by a woman his people had kidnapped, tortured and held prisoner for a couple of years. Then the ocean rose up and destroyed his fleet.”

Tom Riddle blinked as he wasn’t sure what to say about that.

“Speaking of Wan Shi Tong…is he aware his library is in the center of a trackless desert and is all but buried under the sand, but for a single tower?”

Tom Riddle looked a bit sheepish.

“Probably not…neither one of us really gets out much.”

Harry face palmed. “You’re hopeless.” He sighed, before straightening and clapping his hands
together. “Okay team, let’s make the most of our trip to the library. Aang, why don’t you go head
towards the Air Nomad section? There might be stuff about what all happened to your people,
maybe some word on possible survivors. Katara, I guess you can either check out the water tribe
section or help Aang.”

“What are you going to do?”

“We’re going to see if we can get a good map of Fire Nation, and see if there’s anything else useful
in here. Sokka will be in charge of that. Me, I’m heading to the Earth kingdom archive.”

“What for?”

“Well, the war started here. I wanted to see if there were any records of the earliest colonies and
such. I also wanted to see if there was anything about the current Earth King. Oh, hey…if you come
across any music and whatnot from your respective peoples set it aside so I can make copies. I think
everyone’s getting a bit sick of my small repertoire.”

“You can ask one of the foxes wandering around if you’re having trouble finding what you’re
looking for, and there’s also a cross referenced master index in each section, and the shelves should
be clearly marked with both the index numbers and the main subject area.”

“Oh, thanks!”

“Well, I’m heading for the Earth Kingdom archive.”

“I’ll walk you.”

Harry hesitated, which was just long enough for Tom Riddle to rise and walk around the table to join
him.

“Yeah, wow, you two probably have lots to catch up on, huh? Running into that professor sure was
lucky, I mean, think about it, you might never have known he was still alive!”

“Yeah. Imagine that.”

Tom Riddle broke the silence first.

“I was rather surprised to hear that you were in this world. How did you arrive?”

“I made a gateway from the chamber of secrets and stepped through it to the south pole. I wasn’t
dressed for the weather, so as you can imagine, it was rather unpleasant—especially as it was almost
summer when I left. Luckily, I had winter clothing near to hand, and I met the southern water tribe
shortly afterwards. A nice lady named Kanna fed me and let me spend the night in her igloo.”

“Goodness, you do move fast.”

“Sokka and Katara? Kanna’s their grandmother. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

Tom Riddle smirked unrepentantly, before asking “The chamber of secrets?”

“Yes, that chamber of secrets. I take it you never saw the article in the Quibbler about it?”

“There was an article in the paper? Wait, the Quibbler? What’s the Quibbler?”
“Part tabloid, part conspiracy theory, part breaking news—though it usually has a rather unique spin. My friend Luna’s father is the editor”

“And this paper carried a story about the chamber?”

“With pictures. I took Luna and Colin, another friend of mine, down to see it. One time dispensation, with Hogwart’s permission. You’re really not supposed to be down there if you’re not a parselmouth. I only talked her into it because I had checked it out the day prior and the basilisk was dead.”

“Her? Her who?”

“Hogwarts, of course. It was lady Hogwarts that led me to the chamber in the first place. I imagine she didn’t want another mess like with poor Myrtle.”

“Myrtle…oh, right…the weepy Ravenclaw that died. The basilisk was dead? How?”

“They only live for 900 years. It was probably on its last legs when you found it. Poor thing, that’s really no kind of a life, is it? Stuffed away into a dank hole all alone for your many centuries of life…. I had considered making a new one to put down there, but in the end I just couldn’t condemn a living thing to such a fate. I mean, it’s not as though it’s the basilisk’s fault it’s inimical to all life! It’s just born that way.”

Tom huffed and gave him a look that was equal parts amusement and exasperation.

“You’re a very strange person, Harry Potter.”

“I really wish people would stop saying that.” Harry sighed mournfully, before changing the subject. “So, you’ve really been hidden away in this library for the last however long? Weird. I mean, I get it, you’re a knowledge seeker…but jeez. You didn’t even realize there was a huge desert outside because you never even tried to leave!”

“There’s a lot to learn. This world is rather fascinating, and very different from our own.”

“I know. I’ve been travelling it since I got here. I’ve been to the north and south poles, and the Foggy Swamp and met all the water tribes. I’ve been to two of the four Air Nomad Temples, I’ve been to a half dozen Earth Kingdom cities. Whatever you’ve learned about this world through the books in the library, I’ve gotten to see firsthand.”

“And what have you been doing?”

“Fighting a war. It’s been going on for a hundred years, but Fire Nation has recently stepped things up. We’re taking a vacation right now.”

Tom rolled his eyes and kept walking, but Harry stopped and turned to face him. When Tom realized, he turned to face him with a question on his face, though he looked wary.

“How much of the time with the horcruxes do you remember?”

Harry could see he was debating with himself how much to reveal.

“Why do you want to know?”

“I’d like to know what I’m dealing with. I’m assuming you realize some of what happened, or you probably wouldn’t have known who I was when I arrived…”
“And what are you planning to do with this information?”

Harry sighed and crossed his arms, and then began to speak in a measured, spooky voice:

*One comes, with the power to vanquish the dark lord, born as the seventh month dies*
*Born to those who have thrice defied him*
*And the dark lord shall mark him as his equal, but he shall have power the dark lord knows not*
*And either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives*
*One comes with the power to vanquish the dark lord*
*Born as the seventh month dies*

"I made a trip to the ministry to take a look at our prophecy after the horcruxes were undone. Sirius mentioned there was one and I wanted to see what it said."

Tom Riddle looked grim. “So…you’re here to kill me then.”

“Don’t be a melodramatic idiot. It’s rather embarrassing in a man your age.”

Tom blinked and looked rather nonplussed at being described as a ‘melodramatic idiot’, but Harry cut him off before he could say anything more.

“I had your horcruxes—all of them, in fact. One was in my forehead, and the rest I more or less just stumbled across while minding my own business. You were mad, and broken and murderous, and you wouldn’t have stopped on your own, given the condition your mind and soul were in. I’m quite certain Dumbledore planned to have me find and destroy all the horcruxes. You wouldn’t have been dead, you would have ceased to exist altogether. I would have died, but my soul would have remained intact. As you can probably imagine, that’s small consolation if you’re the one it was going to happen to. Luckily for you, I found out about Dumbledore’s interference in my life before I ever went to Hogwarts. His complete abandonment of me to my relatives, and his refusal to look into my life in any way so that he could have plausible deniability if it ever came out that they’d been mistreating me meant that he missed it. I never trusted him, I avoided his handlers, and his refusal to look into my life was left to me to fulfill my ‘destiny’—he made mocking air quotes ‘on my own terms and in my own way. I went through the pain of healing your soul with you—every time, mind you. I was there for the whole thing. In fact, it never would have been possible if I hadn’t been there. You were so broken and mad you no longer had the capacity to regret anything, and you positively reveled in death and destruction. My soul was intact, and fused to part of yours. Our magic and lifeforce was so entwined that we were for all intents and purposes one person—at least enough to fool the remorse clause and kickstart the process of healing your shattered soul. That was the ‘power the dark lord knew not’: plain old simple human feelings.”

Tom Riddle was still listening, so Harry continued.

“My godfather and his friend, when they found out what I’d been doing and witnessed one of the horcruxes unraveling…they were horrified, and terribly afraid for me. They urged me to simply destroy the others. I had to be the one to tell them that going that route would mean my death. I made a deal with the goblins to kill me if I wasn’t able to remorse away the one in my forehead, but they had to give me a year to do things my way first. They agreed. And now…well, here you are and here I am. So please, stop it with the melodrama and ‘oh, you’re here to kill me’. Frankly, I find it insulting, after all we’ve been through together.”

Tom stayed still and silent during Harry’s recitation. The only real sign of his distress was the faint pallor of his skin, and the tightness around his eyes and mouth.

“So you see, you can stop worrying--I had the chance to do much, much worse, and I chose to heal
you instead. I don’t care if you made up your freaky anagram name when you were a spotty teenager with delusions of grandeur—Lord Voldemort was a mad, broken thing that very nearly destroyed the British Wizarding World. He needed to be stopped, and I did that. What you do with your second chance is up to you. Don’t attack me or mine and you and I have no problem. Now, I repeat…how much do you remember?”

Tom Riddle stood lost in thought for a long time before he finally answered.

“It’s…hard to explain. I remember my childhood and most of my years at Hogwarts…I also remember bits and pieces of lore and magic, and I’ve found I can perform a variety of spells that I have no clear memory of having learned. I remember snatches of being Voldemort…that’s all though. It’s like remembering a dream—you remember it, but the edges are fuzzy and the details unclear—faces, and places and conversations, but without context, and only pieces of the whole.”

He shuddered then, and his hands clenched spasmodically at his sides.

“I also remember pain—like nothing I’ve ever felt before. Making a horcrux is nothing in comparison. It just went on and on and on…I thought I might go mad from it, but apparently as I was already quite mad I just came out the other side. I try not to remember it, but it’s there, lurking just beneath the surface”

He raised a shaking hand to his breast, and then seemed to remember he had an audience and dropped his hand while trying for nonchalant.

“My first clear, sharp memory beyond Hogwarts is that of waking in a cave, naked and looking like this. I stole some clothing, acquired a wand, and built a device to take me somewhere else.”

He met Harry’s eyes for a moment, and he could see the faint resentment simmering there in the depths of Tom Riddle’s gaze.

“I wasn’t expecting to ever see anyone I knew from my old life again.”

“Neither was I, not while I was here. Accept it and move on.” Harry huffed in reply.

Harry sighed then and ran a hand through his hair.

“Like I said, what you do with your second chance is on you. You say you’re now essentially what you were before all the horcruxes and the dark-lording and what have you. Great! Fantastic even! My prophecy with the dark lord has been fulfilled. End of story.”

Having said his piece, he continued on his way towards the Earth Kingdom archive. Tom Riddle said nothing, but he fell into step with him.

Part of Harry was relieved, however much he hated to even think about it: the strange haunting emptiness had disappeared. He hadn’t realized how much of a burden it was until it had.

He slanted a glance sideways at his companion and wondered if he’d felt it too, and that was why he’d chosen to stick around, even though their business with one another was for all intents and purposes done and over with. He almost wished that he dared ask, but he knew he never would.

“So, what are you looking for exactly?” Tom asked when they arrived at the entrance to the Earth Kingdom part of the library.

“I don’t know specifically. I guess I just wanted a better feel for the climate of the times when the war began. Aang was and still is a child, and he was living off in a monastery learning to be
detached. He knows nothing of the political climate, or the issues that might have precipitated the war. Since our goal is to stop the war, little things like that could be important to seeing it actually stays stopped. I think a hundred years is long enough for anyone, but if the issues that lie at the heart of it aren’t resolved it will just erupt again in another decade or so.”

“At least you’re a realist. Nothing sticks in my craw worse than a gooshy idealist who thinks hugs and rainbows will just make everything better.”

“Speaking from personal experience?”

“You said you were there. Did you miss the years I spent trying to find somewhere other than the orphanage?” he asked bitterly.

“Why didn’t you ever just angle for an invite to a friend’s house? Why didn’t you approach Slughorn?” he asked bitterly. “He utterly adored you—at least until you asked him for a blueprint to murder and madness. I’m sure he would have tried to wrangle something for you. Why go to the headmaster, who from what I saw was quite elderly and a bit soft in the head? When you add in that you already knew the assistant headmaster had it in for you, it really makes no sense.”

“I needed my acquired status in Slytherin house too much to risk it by becoming the charity case. Slughorn, while useful, is hard to take in large doses. I could manage his parties and having him in class, I could even stomach the Slug Club meetings. That was more than enough for anyone, especially when you’re one of his ‘favorites’. He doesn’t give you a moment to yourself. I was good at the game, but I needed breaks from it in order to keep my sanity, such as it was. A whole summer either with the man or in his debt was too much to ask. That left Dippet.”

“You could have tried getting a job in the summers in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade.”

“That would have been worse than being the charity case. Working as a common laborer would have completely ruined whatever strides I’d made…” he snarled.

Just as abruptly, he slumped slightly in place, and his manner became uncertain.

“…or so it seemed at the time. Looking back, I’m no longer so sure, but I can’t exactly go back and change it. One thing I do know for sure however is that Dumbledore’s insistence that I needed to turn into some namby-pamby muggle loving doormat was wrong. It was an orphanage for fuck’s sake! We were the flotsam that the rest of the world would just as soon forget. There was never enough of anything, and you learned quick that you were either a predator or you were prey. The worst part is, that’s something he knows and practices in his own life—but when it’s him, he’s a bloody saint or something—anyone else and it’s a sign of evil that needs to be destroyed post-haste. Ruddy manipulative old sod.”

"The man has issues, there’s no denying it. You’re right of course in that he dislikes Slytherins. Having the poor taste to be sorted there at age eleven will in fact get you an automatic black mark in his book on top of whatever his feelings about your blood status. One doesn’t have to do anything marginal, or evil, or illegal really, to be branded such by he and his cohorts. You just have to not like him, not look to him for permission to exist or be a wizard. And this is the guy that has pretty much been single-handedly in charge of all aspects of life in Britain for decades now. It’s completely mind-boggling to me.”

Tom Riddle smiled with what looked to be genuine relief.

“I know! I’ve never understood it. Some of the crap he pulls, were it anyone but him, people would be howling for his blood, and his head on a pike—but because it’s him, they’re all ‘oh well, he
knows best, might as well just grin and bear it.’”

“Yeah, it kind of ruins the whole ‘wow, a whole hidden magical world that I am a part of’ experience, once you realize he’s crouched in the center of everything like a big, bloated spider, and that actually embracing your heritage is dependent on remaining in his good graces.”

“You seem to have been relatively successful in evading him.”

Harry eyed him askance and stifled a sigh. There was resentment in those blandly spoken words. He could even understand a bit. The guy was supposed to be a genius prodigy, and yet, he’d stupidly ruined his life and accomplished pretty much the complete opposite of what he’d originally wanted to do with regards to Dumbledore.

“I got lucky. He thought I was a tool, beaten down and shaped until I’d be eager for his hand. His plans all hinged on that, and so when it didn’t work and I refused to run like a rat through the little mazes he set up for me, he was left scrambling last minute to rearrange everything. He’s not a man who works well under pressure. He’s gotten so used to just making pronouncements from on high and then going about his merry way and leaving his scurrying minions to enact his will that he made a lot of assumptions, and didn’t actually check on the progress of what was happening. It helps that my little social club included all the kids from all the houses in my own year and the one above and below—it meant the usual walls between houses that kept information from flowing were gone, and as we were hanging out in the dungeons, far from his portraits reporting, he wasn’t getting regular feedback that he could use to shape events to be more to his liking.”

Tom ruminated on this for a bit. Happily, he seemed willing to accept that it was differing circumstances rather than innate superiority on Harry’s part that had led to such different conclusions thus far.

“You noticed the portrait spy network too? I wanted to bang my head on the walls sometimes. I’d try to tell people about things like that, and they either ignored me, or thought I was mad. The ones who believed me went mad when I did and ended up either dead or in Azkaban.”

“I take it you won’t ever be returning to our world?”

Tom froze for a moment. It was obvious that he’d never really confronted what his flight from their original world really meant. He stared at the books and scrolls surrounding them with unseeing eyes for a moment, before letting out a sigh that was equal parts resignation and bitterness.

“I’ll never be free of the past if I do. You’ve had some small successes, but you’ve not actually loosened his hold on the world or toppled his regime. He’s still firmly wedged into Hogwarts, he’s still able to simply say the word and expect his will to be done. Whatever success you’ve had will be undone should I reappear. He’ll simply use me as a stepping stone to regain all he’s lost, and probably gain a few extras along the way. You must have come to much the same conclusion—why else are you here?”

“You’re partly right. It isn’t just him though, it’s everything about the British Wizarding community. We’re so enmeshed in the muggle world on all sides that there’s really nowhere to get away from it, and there just isn’t enough space or enough places that are ours to really make for a real semblance of a life. I know there are dozens, if not hundreds of witches and wizards in Britain who have gone their whole lives without mixing much, but the price they pay for that is to be more or less chained to their homes and one or two other places, and spending every moment of every day hyper aware of everything they do, say and think.”

Just like that, Harry’s frustration and bitterness bubbled over.
“and our government isn’t happy with that! They take every opportunity to constrain us more and more and it’s stifling! I came here to learn how to breathe again!”

“So did I.” Tom agreed quietly.

Harry sighed and the tension bled out of him.

“Hiding out in a library reading about the world you’re in isn’t much of a life though. You should probably try to get out and see some of it. You might like it…or you might want to go to another world and see if it’s a better fit.”

“Where are all of you going next?” Tom asked casually.

“At the moment, I have no idea. We’re waiting on a response to a letter Sokka wrote which will probably determine our next stop to some extent. After that, who knows?”

“You’re running around, supposedly fighting a war, and you have no plans?”

“Hey, we’re here doing the research thing, aren’t we? Give me a break.”

Harry wasn’t sure how much time had passed, when suddenly the building around them started shaking.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure…but I have a feeling it’s not good.” Tom replied, eyeing the shaking building warily.

Harry grabbed up the copies he’d made during his perusal of the library and hurried after Tom, who had already taken off running deeper into the library.

They both skidded into view and found Sokka, Aang and Katara confronting a giant owl, who was slowly morphing into a more snake-like form.

“What’s going on?”

“Mortals! Always seeking destruction! That isn’t what I created this library for! I created it to better humanity, but no! You’re all so determined to use my hard-won knowledge for evil ends! I gave you all a chance to prove yourselves, but you’ve lived down to my expectations in the end!”

“We’ll fight you! We’re not afraid!”

“You should be. I am he who knows ten thousand things. I have studied every bending style. There is nothing you can do that will defeat me! I know Air bending, I know Southern Water Style, I know Northern water style! I even know Foggy Swamp style!”

“Oh yeah? Do you know this? Sokka style!” Sokka cried as he dropped down on him from above and clubbed him in the head with the flat of his sword.

Wan Shi Tong reeled for a moment, and the kids started running.

“Move! I doubt that’s going to hold him for long. We need to get out of here! He’s going to take the whole place back to the spirit world and us with it!” Sokka yelled.
Harry resisted the urge to facepalm, and instead unrolled the carpet. Tom jumped on behind him—'going to the spirit world' sounded far too much like 'going to die' for his liking. The others jumped on behind and he took off like a shot. All the while the library continued shaking around them.

“Professor! Come on! We have to leave! He's taking it back to the spirit world!” Aang called.

“Leave? No! I’ve searched my whole life for this place! I won't go!”

“Suit yourself.”

“Harry! We can’t leave him!”

“Yes, we can. He’s a big boy, we warned him, he made his own decision.”

They reached the tower and flew out the window, only to see Toph struggling to hold the tower in place, while Zuko and his uncle were fighting a group of people swathed in tan clothing and head wraps that blended in with the sand all around them. They seemed to be trying to steal Appa and a couple of big lizards.

“Toph, we’re free, you can let go!”

Toph let go of the tower and nearly followed it into the sand. Aang leapt from the carpet, staff at the ready. The desert bandits went flying, and Appa was able to win free of the few restraints they’d managed to get on him. Harry swooped down and grabbed Toph and retreated a distance to avoid the sand and fire that was suddenly whipping around every which way.

The desert bandits seemed unwilling to retreat, so Tom solved that by blowing up one of their catamarans. The bandits broke off fighting and looked at the destroyed catamaran, and the two that were left.

“One….two…” Tom taunted.

They decided a retreat was in order before they lost their transportation and got stranded in their own desert.

Harry’s eyes widened as the bandits retreated. Those who had been fighting the others and trying to capture Appa had all been earthbenders. Those who had remained by the catamarans and were even now pushing them across the desert in retreat were airbenders. Bits of sand whipped up in their ‘sand tornadoes’ that they were using to billow the sails, and so at first glance they were just more sandbending earthbenders…but they weren’t.

He glanced at Aang and decided that particular revelation could wait till after the war was over. He could decide on his own whether he wanted to find any of the desert airbenders then. He was too riled up at the moment at the near theft of Appa. While the Foggy Swamp folks had also tried to steal the bison, they’d let him go without complaint once Aang made it clear he wasn’t going to allow it. The sand folks had kept fighting and trying to steal him, even with all the resistance. He wasn’t looking too forgiving at the moment.

Yeah, probably best to wait awhile and let him cool down.

In the quiet that engulfed them once the sandbenders were gone, the two groups—the gang plus Tom, and the two Fire Nation royals—contemplated one another and tried to think what to do next.

“You’re here to capture Aang again, I take it?” Katara snarled with hatred.
Zuko said nothing, but his silence was damning.

“Aang’s freedom is non-negotiable. However, you did do us a good turn by protecting Appa. With that in mind, we’ll allow you to use the shelter I built to guard you from the desert sun. I’m sure you’ll find it much easier to travel by night.” Harry spoke into the silence.

He popped out another small barrel and held it up in his hands, before levitating it down to the two men.

“Let it not be said that we cannot be gracious enemies.”

Aang wasted no time getting Appa into the air. Harry and the rest followed after him on the carpet.

Zuko watched them retreat, and felt Toph’s disappointed gaze, and Katara’s look of loathing, like hammer blows.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his uncle gearing up to speak, and held up a hand to halt him.

“Uncle, don’t. Just… don’t.”

“Very well my nephew. I will hold my peace.” The for now went unsaid but was understood.

Capturing the kid and letting the war continue was wrong.
Helping him or letting him run free was treason.
There were no right answers.

He didn’t know what he was going to do. All he did know was he didn’t want to hear any wise sayings or confusing proverbs right now.


It was growing dark by the time the edges of the desert appeared, though the land they ended up in was still more desert than not.

“Let’s set up camp before it gets much darker.”

Aang nodded and brought Appa in for a landing, while Harry landed the carpet beside them with a soft ‘thump’.

Tom looked around at the sandy ground, and the loose rocks that littered it, and wrinkled his nose in distaste. Part of him was already regretting agreeing to come along…although, with the alternative being sucked into the spirit world against his will, it wasn’t as though he’d really had much choice in the matter.

Picturing a night spent camped out on the ground like a muggle, he was beyond overjoyed when Harry unpacked a small wizarding tent.

A very small wizarding tent.

While he set up the tent, the little blind girl stomped her foot and created a half-circle of rough stone benches and a fire pit. The boy…Sokka, he thought his name was, gathered up wood and set it up for a fire.
“Hey, Tom, right? Could you, ya know” he mimed pointing a wand at the stacked logs.

Tom complied, but only because the night was growing chilly.

The bald kid unrolled a scroll, and produced a pile of hay and some fruit from somewhere for the bison and the lemur. The older girl ducked into the tent and returned with a cauldron.

“Could you set this up over the fire for me?”

Tom stifled a sigh and poked the cauldron with his wand, to make it hover over the flames.

She started chopping vegetables and tossing them in the pot, while her brother started making up skewers of meat and setting them up around the fire.

It had all the air of a well-practiced routine, but then, Harry had said they’d been travelling around for a few months.

Once the animals were fed, the tent set up, and dinner on its way to cooking, Harry addressed the group.

“Okay, what the hell happened in there?”

Sokka, Katara and Aang exchanged shame-faced looks. Sokka eventually spoke up.

“It’s my fault. When Wan Shi Tong let us in to the library, he said we had to follow two rules—we had to add to the collection, and we couldn’t use the knowledge in the library for destruction. I found something while I was looking around. It was a letter describing an eclipse that made all the Fire benders lose their power. There was an astronomical clock in the library, and I used it to figure out when the next eclipse is. It’s coming up in a couple of months. I got excited and told Aang and Katara that it could be the key to ending the war. We could launch an invasion and kick the Fire Nation’s ass while they’re helpless!”

“And Wan Shi Tong didn’t like your plan?”

“Yeah, can you believe it?”

“Wow, we can really end things?”

“How long does the eclipse last?” Tom asked suddenly.

“Huh?”

“Eclipses don’t last for long—the actual eclipse that is. You’re talking a few minutes at most. Everything keeps moving. The lead up and retreat might take a while, but the eclipse itself doesn’t last long. We’d have to be there, ready to strike, with the Fire Lord in front of us when it happened. I really doubt he’s going to stick around when he knows he’s about to become powerless for a few minutes.” Harry answered.

“Exactly. It’s probably not the solution you were looking for…and a war ended when your enemies are helpless would be a resentment that would linger among them for generations to come. There would likely be no lasting peace were things to be ended like that. They will tell themselves and their children that they were right all along to attack the rest of the world, because the rest of the world is
filled with dishonorable savages who wait until they’re helpless to slaughter them.” Tom agreed.

“As if they haven’t done exactly the same! Who cares if they like it!” Katara demanded, outraged.

Sokka, who was depressed and disappointed at the failure of his great idea, roused himself enough to disagree.

“We had waterbenders when they were raiding us. They stopped when there weren’t any more left. The giant fleet at the north pole seemed to be Zhao’s vendetta more than anything, but again, we had warriors and waterbenders there and ready to fight. They swarm over the world like locusts, destroying everything in their path, but I suppose in their own minds they’re fighting honorably, warrior to warrior. The fact that they keep winning just means that they’re in the right.”

Katara jumped to her feet, nearly incandescent with outrage.

“How could you say that? How could you defend them or ever, ever suggest that they’re right! They’re monsters! They took mom! They need to be destroyed!”

“He wasn’t saying they’re right…he was trying to see their point of view, which is completely different.” Toph pointed out.

“Who cares about their point of view! They’re evil!”

“I really doubt their whole country and everyone in it is evil. The only Fire Nation people the rest of the world has seen or interacted with in the last hundred years are soldiers who were sent out to conquer other nations. The folks back home are just living their lives, waiting anxiously to hear if their husband, son, brother, or friend is coming back alive. Their whole lives probably revolve around the war as much as anyone else’s does. Soldiers need to be fed, and equipped after all. Most of the folks back in Fire Nation have probably lived their lives surrounded by propaganda about the necessity of the war to protect all of them. They’re probably indoctrinated from childhood onward, and taught to be obedient, follow orders and march in lockstep while in school—it’s easier to make soldiers of people if they’ve already been shaped for the lifestyle.” Harry disagreed.

Tom Riddle picked up the thread of Harry’s thought.

“A good portion of the money, goods and food produced is probably slated for the armies. Most of the people in the country are probably off in jobs that support the war effort, and each new generation probably has its best and brightest shipped off to die on foreign shores. The only people who are benefitting are the Fire Lord, his generals and high ranking officers, and those people who own the food concerns and factories that are supplying the war effort. Everyone else has probably found themselves on short rations and losing family members and friends generation after generation. I lived through a war in my own world, and that’s what it was like for us—and our war only lasted a couple of years, not a hundred.”

Katara looked at all of them, and found no support for her wish to destroy Fire Nation—in fact, Aang was looking at her as though she’d grown a second head, his eyes wide and betrayed. She wrapped her arms around herself as though she were in pain and stumbled off into the darkness, choking back a sob.

Sokka rubbed his hands over his face and then followed her.

“I don’t understand how she could say that. Katara’s a good person.” Aang whispered in a small voice.
“If push came to shove, I highly doubt Katara would actually slaughter the Fire Nation, even if given a chance, because she is a good person. She lost her mother when she was young, and she never really dealt with it. She pushed everything down deep inside and kept busy taking care of people, while wishing for a hero to come along and make everything better. All that stuff she didn’t deal with is now bubbling to the surface, because she’s having to deal with the idea that, even if the war ends and the world is at peace, her mom is never coming back. Give her time and try to be understanding.”

“She still shouldn’t say those things.”

“Aang? How did you feel when you saw the bones at the air temple?”

Aang flinched and looked down at his feet.

“Terrible. I felt like there was a monster inside me clawing to get out.”

“Imagine if you’d stuffed that monster down deep, deep inside and left it to fester for years and years—and over that time it got bigger and stronger. The monster is free now, and she’s having to deal with it, after years and years of pretending it wasn’t there. She’s in pain, and she’s angry, and she wants her mom back. Like I said, try to be understanding.”

“Sokka isn’t like that.”

“Sokka got angry, and he mourned, and he moved on. It doesn’t mean he loved her any less, it just means he dealt with his grief. Katara didn’t. She was younger, and she was probably closer to her mom. Sokka still had their dad. Katara did too, but it wasn’t the same. She probably also feels guilty; the attack happened because they were looking for the last waterbender. Their mom told the soldiers it was her. Katara probably blames herself. I know from experience that survivor’s guilt can be a really difficult thing to overcome. It’s something you yourself should know quite well.”

Harry took over tending the stew and the skewers of meat, and sent Tom and Toph inside to fetch the bowls and spoons so they could eat.

Sokka and Katara returned when it was time. Katara looked miserable and didn’t meet anyone’s eyes while she ate. Sokka looked careworn and ate without enthusiasm. Aang picked at his meal and cast shamed looks at Katara. Tom, Harry, and Toph ate their food, and quietly monitored all the angst.

Katara finished her meal and slipped off into the tent like a ghost once she was finished. Toph went with her.

Aang and Sokka finished next and slipped off as well.

“Do they usually leave you to play camp counselor and clean up their messes?” Tom wondered idly.

“Well, I took on the role of teacher and surrogate big brother to Aang when I met him. I seem to have fallen into such a role with the rest along the way. The cleaning up, I don’t mind so much.”

He flicked his wand and scorgified the bowls and spoons, and then the cauldron, and banished them into their shelves in the kitchen.

“I can do it much easier than any of them can, so it’s a chore I’ve taken on without too much protest.”

Tom Riddle nodded thoughtfully at Harry words and leaned back to stare up at the sky.

“The sky looks so different here.”
Harry rejoined him by the fire and glanced up to the sky as well.

“It does, but what a view. You can’t even see the stars most places back home. There’s too much smog and too many lights.”

Tom nodded with a grimace. “You could still get a view like this when I was a child…still could until pretty recently, if you were out far enough.”

“But those places are becoming fewer and farther between, and even in the country, the towns are lit up like a Christmas trees late into the night most places, and the roads are filled with cars and streetlights.” Harry concluded. “It makes me feel sorry for the generations growing up now. They’ll never be able to look up at the sky and just be stupefied by the wonder of the universe. What a sad little world, without any stars.”

“You reap what you sow. The muggles have been doing their utmost to destroy the world for generations, all in the name of progress. Now, they have to live in the world they’ve made.”

“Everyone has to live in the world a few have made. That’s not fair.”

“It isn’t, but what can you do? There aren’t enough witches and wizards to reverse the trend, and the muggles would fight it every step of the way….half our own people would as well. It’s not fair to stop them from destroying the world and polluting it, apparently.”

“They don’t have magic. They can’t just wave their wand and make the world safe and comfortable for themselves. Technology and science are to them what magic is to us. We would fight anyone who tried to take our magic away.”

“So we would. I don’t have to like it.”

“No, you don’t.”
Chapter Summary

The gaang make plans for the spring equinox, Harry and Tom discuss the possibility of moving the wizards to a new world, Azula and friends decide to help Zuko capture the avatar.

“Finally. I thought we’d never get here.”

“Really Mai, must you be so gloomy? You’re completely ruining my adventure.” Azula grumped.

“So sorry.”

“You know, sarcasm is really not attractive when I’m not the one doing it.”

They left the mongoose dragons behind one of the tents.

“Guard” Azula told them firmly. She almost hoped someone tried to steal them—boy, would they be in for a surprise.

Mai nudged her and pointed to a tent far to the left. A figure in pink was doing a handstand…on her two index fingers.

“She always was such a show off.” Azula muttered.

Mai grimaced and rubbed at her fingers, wondering how Ty Lee could manage such a feat without breaking them.

Ty Lee smiled when they approached and bent herself double before collapsing in a graceful kowtow. She bounced to her feet without apparent effort right afterwards and embraced first Azula and then Mai while wearing a bright and happy smile.

Azula looked around at the circus tents, and wrinkled her nose at the smell of animals, sweat, grease paint, and cheap snack food.

“So…this is your new home.”

“Yep! It’s great! My aura has never been pinker!” Ty Lee chirped in response.

“How…lovely” Azula deadpanned while rolling her eyes. “How can you stand being in such surroundings?”

“It’s so freeing! I’ve finally found a place that I belong, and I’m making people happy. What’s wrong with that?” Ty Lee asked, sounding a little hurt.

“Don’t mind her, Ty Lee. She missed you, and this is apparently her way of showing it.”

Azula turned to glare at her, but she suddenly had an armful of Ty Lee. She’d only been gone for a few months, and she’d already nearly forgotten how affectionate she was.
“Oh Azula! I missed you too! And I missed you, Mai!” she wailed, flinging herself on her other friend. She pulled away from Mai and sniffled a bit, before pulling both of them into a group hug. “And now we’re all together again in my favorite place and it’s wonderful!”

Azula grimaced a bit when she saw people were staring at all of them, but she patted Ty Lee on the shoulder nonetheless. There’s was no dealing with her when she got like this unless she got it out of her system.

She blinked in surprise when she felt Mai’s arm slip around her shoulders, and realized her own arms were moving as though of their own accord to complete the circle.

When did everyone she knew become such touchy-feely hippies? Why, she’d been hugged more in the past few months than she had in the whole rest of her life. Not since her mother…

She squeezed her eyes tight and pushed the thought away violently, but not before a treacherous shudder shook her, even if only for a moment.

She was nearly undone when Ty Lee stroked her hair and murmured soothing nonsense in her ear, and Mai began rubbing a light circle on her back.

She pulled away from both of them and wrapped her royal status around herself like a shield. For the first time in her life, it occurred to her that a shield could also be a prison.

Mai and Ty Lee let her pull away without protest, though Ty Lee looked rather wounded.

“Your show will be starting soon, won’t it?”

“Oh my gosh! You’re right! I have to get ready! You’re staying to see it, right?”

“We traveled here from Omashu by mongoose dragon. Of course we’re staying for the show--right Azula?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Azula answered in something approaching her usual mocking drawl.

“Well, we have escaped the desert, Prince Zuko. Where do we go now?”

Zuko sighed and turned his mongoose dragon towards the port Lieutenant Jee was supposed to meet them in.

“We are not following the avatar?”

“To do what? Get captured or possibly killed? The avatar’s group keeps expanding. It’s now the avatar, those kids from the water tribe, Toph and two airmenders…spirits…whatever they are.”

“Spirits, my prince, definitely spirits. They might look human, but they’re actually feathered dragon spirits. It was the one who offered us water who took Miss Bei Fong from the ship. I don’t know where the other one came from…unless he’s been at the library all this time, waiting for them to come get him? It would certainly explain both why they went out there, and how they knew where the place was.”

“What do you mean they’re feathered dragon spirits?”
“I have been able to see spirits since my trip to the spirit world, nephew. I saw the spirit in its true form when Miss Bei Fong was taken. I realized no one else could see him, and so I hesitated to speak, and everything happened so quickly afterwards that I really had no chance to. When we saw them there, I could see their true forms like a faint afterimage around them. Whatever sort of spirit they are, they’re the same kind—a feathered, colorful dragon with horns like a deer-antelope.”

“Part bird, part dragon, part deer? Are they spirits of the air, fire or the earth?”

“You forgot water. Dragons are creatures of flight and fire, but they also enjoy a nice swim…and there are old stories that suggest that some of the river spirits of the Fire Nation were dragons in another lifetime.”

“So, what are they then? Past avatars?”

“I do not know, my nephew, but I think they are not avatars. There is something uncanny and wild about the both of them that I cannot explain. All I know is that the strange and otherworldly power we felt rise that one night at the temple felt the same as them.”

“So three master benders, a swordsman/trap-specialist and two dragon spirits.” Zuko enumerated with a depressed sigh. “I’m never going home again, am I?”

“Mere mortals cannot see the path that destiny has laid out for them nephew. If we are lucky, we can get glimpses of the possibilities, but that is all. Do not give in to despair when you still have no notion of what your future may hold.”

“So…what did you think of my show?” Ty Lee asked with giddy cheer, once she’d rejoined her friends.

“It was interesting, I suppose. Don’t you get bored though? The same thing, night after night, even if you do travel in between, surrounded by commoners and smelly animals?”

“But I’m making people happy and they clap for me, and the children always look so amazed!”

“Is this really what you want to do with the rest of your life?”

“Well…maybe not the whole rest of my life, but it’s fun right now.”

The three girls were walking along the dockside of the town they were in. The circus was set up on the outskirts. It was shutting down for the night. Where a few hours ago there had been light and noise and the sound of crowds oohing and ahhing, there was now only darkened tents, the faint sound and smell of the circus animals, and the refuse left behind by the crowds. Even in the town itself, most of the shops were closed for the night, and the houses that dotted the shore were slowly darkening. They had already been bothered once tonight by the cutthroats and thieves who wandered such places in the darkness of night, but they three were no ordinary, helpless Earth-kingdom maidens. If their attackers were lucky, they would survive the night. Word had spread quickly after that among the underworld denizens that, pretty teenage girls or not, they were dangerous.

“What in the… is he following me? Or you, I suppose.” Azula grumbled.

“What?”

“That ship there.”
“What about it?” Ty Lee wondered.

“That’s Zuko’s ship. I ran into it on the way to Omashu. What is he doing here? I haven’t seen or heard anything about the avatar.”

“Zuko’s here? Goody! It will be so great to see him!” Ty Lee enthused. She turned to Mai with a grin and nudged her with her elbow. “Is he still cute?”

Mai blushed and looked away.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Let’s go say hi!”

Mai was already patting her hair and brushing the dust from her robe, and Ty Lee was checking herself over. Azula huffed an annoyed little huff—she’d often suspected that her best friends liked her brother more than her—she didn’t appreciate being witness to proof of that accusation.

“Hello the ship!”

A shadowed figure appeared up on the deck, holding a lantern aloft.

“Princess!”

“Get my brother.”

“My apologies, Princess, but Prince Zuko isn’t here. We left him ashore near the Foggy Swamp. We spotted the avatar in the area. He and general Iroh left us there to pursue on land.”

“What are you doing here then?”

“Prince’s orders, highness. We’re here to resupply and have shore leave before heading back to meet up with them.”

“When will you be leaving?”

“With the morning tide, princess.”

“Very well. I will be returning shortly with a couple of mongoose dragons. You have space for them, I presume?”

“Yes, princess.”

“Excellent. You will transport myself and my companions when you leave. I’ll take my brother’s room. My guests will take general Iroh’s.”

“Yes, princess.”

Azula turned and began walking back towards the circus compound.

“Azula…” Ty Lee whimpered in a small voice.

“Oh, relax Ty Lee. You said yourself that the circus wasn’t a lifetime plan. Your many skills are completely wasted here. You’d be much better served doing something useful, like hunting the avatar.”

“Hunting the avatar?” Mai repeated.
Ty Lee still didn’t look happy, so Azula softened her voice. “It isn’t like you can’t just go back once we’ve captured him. I highly doubt that acrobats of your caliber just grow on trees. If you want, I will talk to the fellow in charge and explain things to him.”

“Thank you, Azula.” Ty Lee murmured.

“Oh, stop being so gloomy!” Azula complained. “You’re acting like Mai. It will be fun. We’ll have an adventure, just the three of us…four, I suppose, when we rejoin my brother. Why, it will be like old times.”

“So you’re going to put flaming apples on my head?”
“You’re going to make me help you play mean tricks on people?”

Azula looked at them both and her face grew cold and hard.

“Yes, of course I am. I am a monster after all.”

The two girls blanched and were quick to assure her they didn’t think she was a monster. Azula wasn’t listening though. She was marching back to the circus with her back straight and her chin held high.

Ty Lee looked at Mai questioningly.

“Don’t look at me. I don’t know what’s going on with her either.”

When they got back, they found Azula already seated on her mongoose dragon, looking regal and impatient. The ringmaster looked miserable and was wiping sweat away from his brow.

“Ah…Ty Lee, the gracious princess has just informed me that she requires your presence.”

Azula nodded to the ringmaster and turned her mount towards the docks.

“Don’t dawdle overmuch.” She snapped before vanishing into the darkness.

Ty Lee thanked the ringmaster for offering her a job, and held out the possibility that she might return soon if all went well. Once he’d been sent on his way, she and Mai went to her tent to pack up her few belongings that she had with her. She was a simple girl with simple tastes, and the circus had provided her costumes, make-up and everything else she needed.

When they were finished, they mounted the remaining mongoose dragon and headed for the ship.

The gangplank was lowered when they saw them coming. There was a soldier waiting on the dock with a lantern to light their way. He took their mount and gestured them to head inside ahead of him.

Lieutenant Jee, ship’s captain, met them on the deck.

“Lady Mai, Lady Ty Lee, it is a pleasure to have you aboard.”

“Thank you.” Mai replied. Ty Lee just smiled a bit wanly.

“Princess Azula has retired and does not wish to be disturbed. I’ll show you both to your quarters.”

Mai and Ty Lee exchanged a speaking glance and turned back to the Lieutenant.

“Thank you captain. I believe we will be retiring for the night as well.”

Lieutenant Jee bowed slightly and waved an arm to indicate that they should follow him.
As they were walking, Lieutenant Jee asked casually, “Will yourselves and our gracious Princess be traveling with us for long?”

“You will have to inquire further with the princess, of course, but I believe she intends that we join her brother on his search and assist him.”

“Ah, that is good to know, Lady Mai. Thank you for your assistance.”

“You’re quite welcome, captain. Thank you for your hospitality. We, and I’m sure our gracious princess as well, bid you and your crew good night.”

“Thank you, ladies. I will be sure to convey your and the princess’ good wishes to my men.”

Once the girls had gone to bed, Lieutenant Jee sighed and went to call a quick meeting. Men were detailed to go fetch extra sheets and wall hangings to decorate two of the larger berths on the ship, and another to rearrange the men to accommodate their surprise guests before meeting up with the prince and general, who it could be assumed would be expecting their rooms back. Another was sent off to try acquiring extra supplies to accommodate three extra people on their travels. None of the shopkeepers would be happy, but Jee wasn’t afraid to use the princess’ rank to get everything accomplished. If she wanted to wedge herself onto his ship without forewarning or so much as a by-your-leave, she could damn well have all the shopkeepers and the like angry at her, not them.

The gang moved their campsite in the morning after leaving the desert. They continued south until hitting the western peninsula that bordered Chameleon Bay in south-eastern Earth Kingdom. The land was once again lush, dotted with streams and small rivers, surrounded on three sides by ocean, filled with rolling hills, meadows and forests. They found a good spot, with rocks and water aplenty, screened from view by the surrounding forest, with a small hill on which to set up their campsite to keep it away from the bending practice going on elsewhere. There was even a small waterfall close by, filling the air with the tinkle of running water. The area was filled with small animals aplenty for Hedwig to hunt when she arrived, and there was greenery and berries for Appa and Momo.

Aang and Toph were practicing earth bending, Katara was practicing her water-bending, Sokka was off setting up traps for small animals to replenish their meat supply. Harry and Tom, who had taken care of breakfast and lunch and the cleaning up afterwards were left to their own devices until the others were done.

“Are there even any people in this world? I assume there must be, but so far I’ve yet to see a soul anywhere but ourselves and those few in the desert.”

“From what I remember of the maps I’ve seen, this area had a couple of small fishing settlements around the bay, but they disappeared during the siege of Ba Sing Se, since there was so much Fire nation presence in and around here. I think the local fishing villages are all now up along the coastline bordering Ba Sing Se itself, where they’re safer from incursion by enemy soldiers.”

“We could probably fit the entirety of the British wizarding population on this one peninsula, with plenty of room to move around, have farms and I don’t know, amusement parks, and set up Hogwarts as well! What’s on the other side of the bay?”

“Another peninsula, equally empty, that is twice as large, if I remember the map correctly, and surrounded by a couple of largish islands.”
“Scratch that. We could probably bring the world population of wizards here and settle just in this one area and have room to expand for generations to come!”

“I know. It’s disheartening, isn’t it? So much open space, no cars, no spy satellites, no pollution, but for a few factories here and there that Fire Nation set up to smelt metal for their ships and tanks. Bountiful nature on all sides, and you can see the stars. There’s even a population of magical people already in place, although ones very different from ourselves.”

“The logistics of transporting the wizards of our world here would be daunting, to say the least, that’s even if we could get most, if any, to agree.”

“I know. I don’t know about the rest of the world, but in Britain at least, there are so many muggleborn, half-bloods and just plain muggle friendlies, it would mean tearing apart the majority of families of wizards to get them to emigrate here. The only ones who might be willing to give it a go would be the small contingent of death eater families, and that’s not enough for a viable population. It would only increase the rate of inbreeding. We would need all the half-bloods and muggleborn to even consider making a go of things, and they’re the ones most likely to object and balk at the idea.”

“I doubt the situation is much better elsewhere, except perhaps in those countries that don’t like Dumbledore or his muggle-friendly policies. He’s had years upon years leading the ICW, and it’s his minions who are in charge of most ministries worldwide. If they’ve had as much influence in their countries as he’s had in Britain, the worldwide wizard population is probably close to dying out as a nation and culture in its own right. He seems to want everyone to be muggles. Not him, of course, just everyone who’s not him.”

“So we have half our people inbreeding generation after generation in an effort to keep their bloodlines pure, the other half outbreeding to such an extent they’re thinning the blood to near non-existence. Meanwhile, the muggles are breeding like cockroaches, filling the air and ground with spying devices and weapons, covering the air, ground and water with pollution, and our Ministries clamp down more and more in an effort to hide us, and squeeze us in to ever tighter cracks in between—cracks which are quickly disappearing, because Dumbledore thinks it’s wrong for us to grab up open land and resources for own use before it disappears.”

“In a nutshell, yes. Fifty years ago, we might have been able to change things. Now…now, I think it might actually be too late already.”

“Our people are going to die out and disappear, aren’t they?”

“I’m afraid they will.”

“I wish we could do something.”

“Keep an open mind and stay open to the possibilities. Magic itself is as much at risk as our people are. I doubt magic will go quietly. It may well be that magic itself will show us the way.”

“You really think so?”

“I have to—the alternative is unthinkable.”

“Spring equinox is coming up soon.” Harry offered after the silence had gone on long enough.

“And?”

“We’ve been doing the seasonal dances. I have to admit I’m curious what will happen this time.”
Harry explained his previous experiences with the dances since coming to that world—the dead air nomads, the moon spirit and lost water tribe woman. Tom’s face remained blandly curious throughout. Harry was puzzled until he had a sudden realization.

“You don’t know anything about what I’m talking about, do you?”

Tom shot him a dirty look.

“You’re hardly alone in that. Most of us in my year, and above and below…and probably the rest of the years as well didn’t either. The few pureblood kids with us whose families kept up old traditions knew them, but that was all. They were appalled at how such knowledge was falling by the wayside and they taught the rest of us.”

He gave him a quick history lesson, and detailed their experiences with the dances and their effects while back in their own world. Tom was intrigued—in all his researches into the far reaches of magic, it was something he’d never encountered.

“It’s passed down strictly in families through oral tradition. There were books mentioning them at Hogwarts, but that’s it, they just mention that there are such things. They don’t explain how to do them or what they’re for or how they affect you. They probably would have been lost if not for the Melting Pot, because there were so few people who knew anything about them. It’s a unique experience really. Magic itself seems to set the pattern. The dance you start off with sort of morphs and changes as it goes along, but you just sort of know what to do once it gets going. That part has been especially noticeable here; instead of variations on the dance like usually happens back home, it completely changes to incorporate the element whose season it is. Autumn is air, winter is water. Spring is coming up, and that’s definitely earth. We’re already in the Earth Kingdom. I suppose we’re going to have to finagle a way into Fire Nation to do the summer solstice.”

“Remember when I said magic itself might point the way?”

“Yeah?”

“Did it occur to you, that maybe it already is? It’s obvious from what you’ve told me that something beyond the obvious is happening, and you said yourself you felt stronger each time, because you felt especially weak when you first arrived, right? Maybe magic is already laying the groundwork for us to save our people.”

“How though? Our people are still in another world. Might magic just be escaping our old world and coming here to save itself?”

“It’s possible, but somehow I don’t think so. Magic is a part of all of us—it’s in our bones, our blood and our souls. It’s entwined in every aspect of our lives, even in these muggle-filled days. It’s as much a part of all of us as we are of it. Magic could no more abandon us than we could simply escape our own minds, bodies and souls. I’ve tried that—believe me, it doesn’t work.”

“So there might be hope? Hope for a better life and for freedom?”

“If we do things right, yes, I think there is.”

They smiled at each other then, excited by the possibilities. Slowly, Harry’s grin began to fade.

“What about you though? You said it yourself—you’ll never be free of the past.”
“New world, new rules, new possibilities. Albus Dumbledore has been slowly killing magic through his muggle-worshiping policies for decades now. I highly doubt magic is any more pleased with the man than I am.”

Harry started getting cautiously excited again. “Do you really think that’s what’s happening?”

“The more I think about it, yes, the more I really think that’s what’s happening.”

“How would it even work though?”

“Well, mind you this might just be an old story I found while traveling the world in my other life…I can’t remember details, but it said something about a world gone bad, choked with poison and crowded with ungifted ones. It implied there was a ritual of sorts, led by a pair of pioneers—avatars of magic, if you would. They travelled far away and magic travelled with them, while remaining connected to the old world. Magic gave the people a choice somehow, to stay or go, and magic seemed to have taken care of the details—or so the story implied, from what I remember.”

“So…you think us being here together in this world isn’t a coincidence then?”

“No…no, I don’t think it is.”

“You said there’s a choice? Didn’t you just get done saying that magic couldn’t just abandon us though?”

“It wouldn’t be abandonment if you choose to stay behind. If, at the end of everything, magic itself leaves the world, well, they’ll still be witches and wizards—it just wouldn’t matter, because there wouldn’t be any magic left for them to wield, and so they would be in effect muggles.”

Harry and Tom both shuddered in horror at the very thought. They both loved magic, lived it and breathed it. Neither could fathom someone choosing to forsake it to be a muggle. Tom had never had any good experience with muggles or the muggle world, so for him it wasn’t even a choice. He would sooner die that forsake magic.

Harry had experiences both good and bad with muggles and in the muggle world. He admired their ingenuity, their curiosity, their drive to know, improve and expand on what they could do. He stood in awe of some of their achievements, such as landing on the moon. Even with all that, he didn’t want to be a muggle, didn’t want to be condemned to a life without magic. He couldn’t imagine anyone would…

Many would, even if they didn’t realize quite what they were doing. He supposed it all hinged on how the choice was presented. He supposed people like Arthur Weasley might just hear ‘no more muggles to gawp at’ and be horrified—then ‘boom!’, no more magic. Folks like Dean and Hermione and Justin whose whole families were muggles but for themselves, folks like Seamus and Susan who had at least one parent who was a muggle…what would they choose?

It wasn’t a difficult choice for himself—though his relations with the Dursleys were better these days, they still weren’t great; certainly not great enough to ever, ever make him choose to stay with them and forsake magic for all time.

Looked at that way, there was a whole lot of people that might be making an impossible choice, one that they would have reservations about no matter which way they chose. He supposed, looked at that way, he should consider himself quite lucky.

“Why two?” he asked suddenly.
“Why two what?”

“Two avatars of magic. Wouldn’t one suffice?”

“Hardly. While magic is magic, it expresses itself as dark and light. That goes for witches and wizards, and the various and sundry magical races and creatures as well. Having two means everyone is equally represented.”

“Oh, I guess that makes sense.”

“If we are right about what’s going on, the coming equinox is going to be very important. It’s the halfway point of the cycle, the element is earth, and spring represents new beginnings. Where the ritual is held and with whom will be of vital importance.”

“Ba Sing Se.” Harry answered immediately.

“Alright. Why?”

“Ba Sing Se is the largest city in all of the Earth Kingdom…probably in all the world, really. From what I’ve seen and read about it, it’s a city larger than many countries are in our old world. That by itself would be enough, but with the war, all the little towns and villages throughout the rest of the Earth Kingdom, as they were being destroyed or overrun, their people have been fleeing to Ba Sing Se. That means representatives from the whole continent should be there. Finally, the Earth King himself. The Earth King is supposed to be the spiritual center of the Earth Kingdom. Technically, he’s supposed to rule over the whole continent, but in practice that hasn’t been the case. The continent is too vast and too diverse for a single man to rule over, but technically he does, even though there are a few smaller kings scattered about the continent. If we’re to do things right, we need to be in Ba Sing Se, and dance with the Earth King on the Spring Equinox.”

“That’s what we’ll do then.”

Zuko stopped dead in the doorway to his room.

“Az? What are you doing here?”

Azula sat up, yawned and stretched, before casting an idle glance at the small window.

“Zuzu. We ran into your ship while visiting Ty Lee at the circus. I told your men to carry us back. Travelling by mongoose dragon, though fast and efficient, is hardly comfortable.”

Just then the siblings heard a shocked feminine yell, and uncle Iroh’s voice apologizing.

“Goodness, my dear ladies. I didn’t know you were in there. Please accept my heartfelt apologies… and my thanks. It’s been many a year since I’ve seen such a view!”

Azula wrinkled her nose in disgust and Zuko cringed in horror at his uncle’s words.

“Us? Mai and Ty Lee are here too? Why did Ty Lee leave the circus? Why are all of you here? And why are you in my room?”

“Where did you expect me to sleep? Down in the hold with the soldiers?” Azula sneered in reply.
As for your other questions, we were bored, so decided to come help you hunt the avatar. I take it your latest foray was as miserable a failure as all the others?"

“It was just uncle and I, versus the avatar and his group, which has recently grown by one, and a large contingent of sand benders. They can fly. It’s hard to hold on to someone who can flit away at a moment’s notice.”

“Why do you need to hold on to him? Just kill him and be done with it.”

“The avatar is reborn each time he dies. He would be reborn among the water tribes. Did you forget our recent failure at the North Pole and the tremendous loss of life…not to mention most of our ships? If that’s not bad enough we’ve also lost several bases, all our earthbending prisoners, our weapons designer, several factories and all the tanks they’d just made. There are angry spirits running amok terrorizing our people. Things are not that simple Azula!”

Azula crossed her arms and looked decidedly sulky.

“No need to get so bent out of shape, Zuzu, it was just a suggestion.” She flicked her fingers at him then. “Go away so I can get dressed.”

He looked for a moment like he really wanted to bang his head against the wall, or maybe strangle her. In the end all he did was grab a change of clothes and stalk out of the room while closing the door with a bang.

She felt marginally more cheerful at having finally gotten under Zuko’s skin—it made things feel more normal. Her good mood slowly drained away though. Her friends’ words from the other night had kept circling through her mind. She had told them they would have an adventure, all of them together—just like old times.

Neither one had seemed particularly happy at the prospect, and had immediately accused her of planning something unsavory.

Her own mother thought she was a monster…and it was true.

It still hurt though. She tried not to think about it. She’d tried to not let it matter, but it still hurt. Were monsters supposed to hurt? She didn’t think so.

Her recent forays into ‘spiritual enlightenment’ had been showing her parts of herself she didn’t particularly care for.

It was all rather frustrating. Once she’d seen those things and acknowledged them, she couldn’t just unknow them. It would all have been simpler if she could have just had these little revelations and opened her chakras and never needed to think on them again. Instead, they were making her reevaluate her life in ways she didn’t particularly enjoy, and they made her see herself in a light she didn’t care for.

Zuko—her proud, stupid, honorable brother. He’d always tried to protect her, hadn’t he? At least, he had when they were very little. Once she’d become a firebender that had changed. She had taken great delight in tormenting him, in sabotaging him in a variety of ways, in testing him again and again to make sure her hold on him remained sound.

He was so very, very stupid sometimes. He always trusted her, always believed her, always tried in his own dum-dum way to be her big brother.

She had repaid that with torment, with destroying his self-confidence and peace of mind…and all
because deep down inside, she was apparently terrified all the time that she was going to be gotten rid of.

Mai, her first friend. Her family lived just across from the palace. She and Zuko had been betrothed at birth. She was a girl of good family and impeccable breeding—not a firebender, but more than suitable for the son of the spare. She’d been sent over from time to time to be her companion, so that she and Zuko could get to know one another without any pressure.

She had tormented her and tested her and pushed her boundaries every chance she’d gotten.

She wanted her fear. Her father had always told her that love was a useless emotion, and that fear was the only proper bridge between those of royal blood and other, lesser beings.

More than that though, she’d always wondered if Mai was really her friend, or if she was only there because she was forced to be. It was easier to make her fear her than to try to find out.

Sometimes, she thought Mai was really her friend.

Ty Lee…what could be said about Ty Lee? She was the first friend she’d made on her own. She’d met her at the Royal Academy for Girls. She was bouncy and cheerful and had useful skills. She had ordered her to sit with herself and Mai, and just like that she was part of their group. Her father, while a nobleman, was a low-ranking one. Befriending her as she had…she sometimes wondered if it had been a small rebellion on her part.

She was the very opposite of everything her father told her was important. Ty Lee hated no one, she hadn’t a cruel bone in her body. Her heart was as gentle as her smile and four times as big. She had showered Azula in praise and affection from the moment she’d met her…and she had soaked it up like the desert drinking the rain. Ty Lee often made her feel weak and foolish for her attachment to her. She went out of her way to hurt her sometimes for making her feel that way…but her tears always undid her in the end.

Ty Lee…most of the time she thought she was really her friend.

The three of them had something in common. They all had lines they wouldn’t cross…and they all believed in honor like it was something real and tangible that you could touch and taste and feel.

Her father told her honor was what weaklings used to deceive themselves into believing they weren’t weak. There was power, and those in charge decided what was right.

Zuko, Mai and Ty Lee all disagreed—she knew it, even if none of them had ever said as much or articulated it in quite that way.

Zuko accepted underserved punishment and scorn from their father in order to shield her, his baby sister. He surged to his feet in indignation in the midst of a war meeting with their father to protest what he felt was unnecessary loss of life. He picked himself up after every setback, every betrayal, every failure, and squared his shoulders to keep going. He had told her that of course he would storm the Fire Nation palace, banished or not, if she needed help.

She believed him.

For Zuko there was honor, and there was what was right, and if those things didn’t jive with what their father said, he would dig in his heels, and take his lumps…but he would refuse to bend.

Mai would speak uncomfortable truths to her, even though she knew full well the consequences of pushing her too far. In those moments, she didn’t fear her…but then, she had never feared her enough, had she? Most of the time, she kept her head down, followed the rules, and never spoke her mind…but in the moments she chose to, she was as rooted and unshakable as a mountain.

Ty Lee wouldn’t hurt anyone, wouldn’t kill. She’d tried to push her to do such things on more than one occasion. Ty Lee feared her, she knew this full well…but she had her lines in the sand and refused to bend on such matters, even though she quaked in her shoes and had tears in her eyes while
refusing. She could tell her rescuing the baby dillo-lion was foolish and risky and useless, command her to pass it by.
Ty Lee would look at her with mournful, frightened eyes and do it anyway.

She…would never do such things.
She could never bring herself to face down her father for something as ephemeral as honor.
She had no doubt in her mind that Mai and Ty Lee could, even if they were afraid.
Zuko already had, on more than one occasion.
It made her feel very small indeed.

For all her pride in her strength, intelligence, and fire-bending prowess…they all had a strength she’d never had. It shamed her to even think it, but in the depths of her own heart and mind, she knew it was true.
Their strength wasn’t of a kind that her father would ever recognize as such. He had only contempt for such things—and that Mai and Ty Lee weren’t benders on top of it?
No, he would never consider either of them strong.

She knew differently.
She cut them down again and again, and why? Because they were strong in ways she wasn’t…and she hated and feared that they were.
She did it to build herself up.
She could only be strong if she cut down everyone around her to make herself look bigger.
Her brother and her friends had never needed to resort to such tactics.

She could feel another knot loosening.

That meant it was true, didn’t it? She, who had always prided herself on her strength…

Deep down inside, she was apparently terrified, and weak…and she used her power, intelligence and insight to do her best to destroy the only people in the world who actually cared about her—Azula…not the princess, not the heir-apparent, not the fire bending prodigy…just Azula.

It wasn’t a happy realization. It left her feeling, hollow, empty…and a little bit lost.

Apparently, Tom Riddle could play the violin.
In fact, he could play it quite well.
What’s more, he had practiced transfiguring a violin out of whatever was near enough to hand often enough that he could do it with barely a thought and a flick of his wand.
For all Harry’s delving through the man’s psyche, it was something he hadn’t known.
It was something very few had known, it seemed.

Cole’s orphanage where Tom Riddle had grown up had believed in trying to instill fear of god and certain graces in their wards, in the hopes of making something worthwhile out of them.

It helped that orphans had a better chance of being adopted past a certain age if they had some pretty talent that hopeful parents could brag about.
Much as had happened with Harry, Tom had been introduced to music, but quite unable to acquire an instrument of his own. He’d had to share the one he’d been allowed to use during lessons, and repeatedly reminded that the instrument was worth far more than he was.

His skill in music was one of many things he had played close to the chest. He’d never let on to most
anyone that he had any interest in or skill in the musical arts.
Not until now, that is.

Harry had been whiling away the hours by painstakingly transposing an Earth Kingdom song he’d
found in the library into something he could play on his flute.

Tom had listened for a while, then made himself a violin out of a nearby fallen tree branch, and a
bow out of a stalk of wild wheat.
The song sounded a lot prettier with both of them playing.

Aang had bounced over once he heard them playing and then cajoled the others into dancing with
him.

Toph, it turned out, was quite an accomplished dancer.
She had received a thorough education in all the ‘womanly graces’.
She could walk, talk, and eat like a lady. She could dance and sing and play the pipa.
None of it had been enough to convince her parents she was anything but a helpless doll that needed
to be hidden away from the world for her own protection.
She equated dancing with imprisonment. It took a lot of convincing to get her to join them.

Sokka grumbled, but joined in without too much convincing. He was getting used to randomly
dancing since he’d met Aang and the others. He did quite a passable job too.

Katara was beautiful, and possessed a certain wild grace that made her a joy to watch.

Aang was, well, Aang. He spun and flipped and barely touched the ground. He, more than any of
them, was born to dance. For him it was self-expression and the sheer joy of movement. He made
you want to get up and dance too.

When Harry and Tom got tired of playing, Harry dug out his green music cube and started teaching
everyone the spring equinox dance. Tom grumbled more than Sokka, but he went through the whole
sequence without seeming effort.
He envied his memory, he really did. He’d only just learned the dances earlier that afternoon while
the others were occupied.
Knowing what a private person he was, Harry had known he wouldn’t appreciate being questioned
on why he didn’t already know the ‘sacred dance rituals’ of his own people, especially as he was
obviously older than Harry, even if not by much (!).

When everyone had practiced and mastered the steps to Harry’s satisfaction, he gathered everyone
around to tell them of the plan he and Tom had concocted earlier.

“So…we’re just going to send a letter to the Earth King, tell him we’re arriving for the Spring
Equinox to dance?” Sokka demanded.

“It seems the best way. The avatar is a big enough deal, if we approach the Earth King directly, he
should be wary of simply offending or alienating him. If we add in that we’re coming to perform a
sacred dance of renewal that will shower blessings upon himself and his kingdom, well, he’d be a
fool to say no, wouldn’t he? If we try to get an audience in the usual manner, the request will be
travelling through various functionaries and tied up in red tape for days, if not weeks or months. It’s
not all that long until the equinox. It seems simpler to just cut through the red tape and approach the
king directly.”

“Makes sense to me.” Toph nodded.
“So, we just need to wait for Hedwig and write up a fancy letter and send it off, right?” Aang asked.

“That’s the idea.” Harry agreed. “So, how’s the earth bending coming along anyway?”

“Pretty good” Toph offered. “Once he got through his whole mental block, he started picking things up pretty quickly, and his recent practices with sensing the earth have been going well. I wouldn’t call him a master yet, but he’s gotten the basics down already.”

“Great. I guess we’ll give you until Spring Equinox, and then we’ll see about getting you a firebending teacher and add that to the roster. Hopefully Zuko has his ass in gear by then. We’re running out of time.”

Harry blinked at the others when he noticed they were all gaping at him.

Sokka rubbed a finger in his ear and then fixed Harry with a stern gaze.

“It might just be my imagination…but I could have sworn you just said Zuko was going to be Aang’s firebending teacher. Zuko. As in the guy who’s chased us all over the world? The angry jerk with a ponytail? Scarface, the crown prince of Fire Nation? Any of this ringing a bell?”

“I’ll kill him before I let him anywhere near Aang! Have you gone completely mad!” Katara snarled.

Aang just stared at him looking poleaxed. Even Toph was eyeing him a bit askance.

“What? I would have thought it would be obvious. He’s the only teenage firebender we know, and he was right there when Aang reappeared.”

Tom Riddle nodded. “He’s right, you know. There’s usually a certain symmetry to these things.”

“But…he wants to capture me and keep me prisoner in the Fire Nation!”

“Well, right now he does, so he won’t be banished anymore. I have a feeling he’s been reevaluating his life and going through a metamorphosis…at least he should be. If he hasn’t, we’ve got a problem.”

“Sir…we’ve spotted what we think might be a campfire. All our intelligence on this peninsula paints it as being quite empty.”

“Excellent! An avatar sighting. I knew it was a good idea for us to come along. We can get rid of your banishment and quell father’s recent delusions in one fell swoop!” Azula piped up cheerfully.

“It’s not going to be nearly as easy as you’re painting it, Azula. The water tribe girl is a rather skilled waterbender, even if all she has at her disposal is a water skin in the midst of the desert. Toph is the current earth rumble champion. She’s skilled, a prodigy even. She beat the five time champion with no more effort than it took her to take out all the competition beforehand. The avatar is a master airbender, he’s fast and agile. He’s already mastered waterbending and is well on his way to mastering earth as well. The water tribe boy isn’t a bender, but he’s agile and skilled with his sword, he can attack from a distance with his boomerang which you may not see coming till it’s already brained you in the back of the head. He’s also very good with traps and likes securing the areas they stay in—you’ll have to be on guard even before we make contact. There are also two feathered dragon spirits. I have a feeling we’ve only seen the very least of what they’re capable of. They can fly, hit targets from a distance, make themselves invisible to anyone but someone who can see spirits, travel long distances quickly. All that’s bad enough, but one of the spirits also wears a sword. I have
a feeling he was the water tribe boy’s teacher, which means he’s probably more skilled than he is, and he’s not bad.”

“Honestly Zuzu, you worry too much. Ty Lee can take away their bending, Mai can get them from a distance, I’m a prodigy fire-bender…and I’m certain you must have improved since I last saw you. We’ve got things covered.”

“I did try to warn you.”

“Shut up, Zuzu, I’m not in the mood!”

“The spirits didn’t even get involved until they decided the fight had gone on long enough and decided to tie us up.”

“Shut up, Zuzu!”

“It was a little disheartening the way they all ignored us afterwards, and just broke down their camp, and wandered around putting out fires.” Mai agreed gloomily.

“Would one of you guys come get me out of here? My legs are starting to cramp.” Ty Lee whimpered.

“We’re not just tied up, we can’t move.” Mai apologized.

“When I see that arrogant bastard again, I’m going to kill him!” Azula snarled.

It had all gone wrong pretty much from the start. Azula hadn’t heeded her brother’s words about being wary of traps and had triggered one that sent a tree branch snapping around to club her. She had avoided the snapping branch, only to land in another trap, which had grabbed her ankle and hung her from another tree branch. She had burned away the rope easily enough, and managed to land on her feet, but having been so easily foiled had seriously thrown her off her game. It was all the worse because, the stupid avatar and his minions were just standing a short distance away, not acting at all concerned. They’d been able to hear their conversation:

“You mean you two aren’t going to help us?”

“It seems like overkill. That would make it six against four. Seems unsporting. Why, do you think you’re going to need the extra help?”

“Well, no…”

“It’s all settled then. You might want to watch out.”

The two spirits had hovered a short distance away on a platform of some sort. One of the bastards wasn’t even watching them, he was reading of all things! The other sipped tea, and called out helpful suggestions, while looking completely relaxed and unafraid.

Ty Lee had managed to take away the water tribe girl’s bending. When she tried cartwheeling towards her next opponent, the blind girl, she had captured her hands in earth, and then her feet, leaving her stuck in a backbend.
The water tribe boy managed to keep Mai occupied trying to pin him down with knives, but then she got hit in the back of the head with a boomerang and knocked out. The spirit that was reading had glanced up and pulled out a stick. Mai, who was still unconscious, went rigid, though her head still lolled to the side, and then simply rose up off of the ground. She drifted over to a tree a short distance away and leaned up against the trunk, then ropes had come snaking out of reading spirit’s stick and wound around her, pinning her in place.

Zuko had gotten distracted by Mai’s fate and let the avatar sink him up to his neck in earth.

Azula had started getting a bit panicky then, as she was the last of her friends standing.

She thought she had put up a pretty good fight, all things considered—it was her versus the avatar, the blind girl and the sword boy. While she was distracted fighting them, the tea spirit had reversed Ty Lee’s chi block on the water tribe girl and she’d come back into the fight with a vengeance.

There were a lot of fires burning by this point, and they were starting to spread. That was when the spirits had enough.

Her body had gone rigid and she had just fallen over, and then floated over to where Mai was tied up. She had woken up at some point and was watching everything with wide, wary eyes.

“Toph? Can you let your boyfriend up?”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” the blind girl had grumbled, before stomping her foot, causing Zuko to shoot out of the ground. Zuko had gone rigid and fallen over much as she had and then floated over to the tree to be tied up with the rest of them.

“Aang, Katara? Do something about these fires, would you? Sokka, get Appa and Momo ready to leave.”

She hadn’t been able to stay silent after such cavalier treatment and had spewed venomous imprecations against all of them and detailed exactly what she was going to do to all of them when she caught up to them again. The brats had ignored her!

Tea spirit had hopped off the flying platform and collapsed the tent, rolled it up and made it disappear into thin air while the rest wandered around, smoothing the ground, putting out the fires and collecting various odds and ends from the campsite.

The rigidness suddenly melted out of Mai’s body and she slumped in place.

“Oh, thank goodness! I was afraid I was going to be stuck like that forever!” she said. Her voice was shaking just the tiniest bit. Apparently, she really had been afraid of it. She managed to get out one of her knives and started sawing at the mass of ropes that bound all of them. There were a lot—a different set for each of them, and Mai was at the bottom. Azula and Zuko unfroze before she sawed through the last of them.

She handed out one of her knives to Azula, as Zuko had his own, and the three of them went to work chipping away the earth that bound Ty Lee. She collapsed out of her backbend with a grateful sigh and then sat patiently while Zuko worked on the last restraint.

When he was done, the four of them slumped in place on the ground.

The whole area was burnt and smelled heavily of smoke—a lot different than the idyllic meadow
“We’re going to have to round up the mongoose dragons.” Ty Lee pointed out.

“Yeah.” Zuko sighed.

“What did the spirit mean by the blind girl being your girlfriend?” Mai asked casually.

“I think we’d all like to know the answer to that.” Azula snarled.

“Oh…well, I made kind of a scene when I kidnapped her in Gaoling, and people misconstrued what was going on. Someone wrote a song about it.” Zuko murmured, sounding discomfited.

“That’s kinda weird. She’s sorta young for you…and I bet if you put her hair up the same way, she’d look sort of like Azula…well, except for the part where she’s blind.” Ty Lee chirped.

Azula turned a scathing look on her brother. “You weren’t trying to replace Mai, you were trying to replace me!”

“I wasn’t trying to replace anyone! I was using her as avatar bait!”

“And what was with you and that spirit, huh?” Zuko demanded of Mai.

“I’ve never met that guy before. I don’t know.”

“You liked it!”

“It’s nice to receive compliments.” Mai sighed in her usual deadpan voice. “At least he didn’t compliment my delightful flexibility. I thought your uncle was bad.”

“That filthy peasant! I’ll destroy him.” Azula grated, enraged all over again.

“Manners, Azula…you don’t want the spirit to come back and give you a spanking.”

“Shut UP, ZUZU!”

“Guys…come on, let’s not fight among ourselves.”

“Come on Ty Lee, let’s try to find our mounts. Hopefully they haven’t wandered too far.” Mai agreed. “It’s a long ride back to the ship.”
The gang moved to the eastern peninsula bordering Chameleon Bay and set up a new campsite after their battle with the kids from Fire Nation.

“I hope Hedwig returns soon…and that all our moving around isn’t what keeps delaying her.” Sokka sighed.

“I’m sure she’ll be along. She was carrying two messages, and we don’t know where exactly Suki got to—Hedwig headed east towards where we are now, not south towards Kyoshi. Your parents wouldn’t try to capture Hedwig and hold her hostage, would they?” he asked Toph.

“I doubt it. My mother is afraid of birds.”

“Why?”

“Bad experience with a falcon-jay when she was a kid.”

“Ah.”

They set up a new campsite and returned to what they’d been doing when the Fire Nation kids had turned up.

“Still think that awful Zuko is supposed to be Aang’s firebending teacher?” Katara asked smugly while they were setting up.

“Yep.”

“What!”

“Did he look like he wanted to be there? He was worried about the others—mostly knife girl, and holding back somewhat. It was the psycho girl with the blue fire who was really gung ho about everything.”

“Wow. You really took a dislike to her, huh?” Sokka snorted.

“I didn’t like the way she was snarling and carrying on after we subdued all of them, it was completely uncalled for. We even went out of our way to make it a fair fight. The way she was acting, you’d think we ambushed her in her room after kicking her puppy and punching her dad in the ‘nads.”

Aang started tittering.

“You really do have a way with words.” Sokka snorted.

“Hee! I’ll have to remember that one.” Toph chortled.

“Boys!” Katara muttered. “Though you’re just as bad!” she added to Toph.
Hedwig, much to Harry’s relief, showed up while they were having dinner. He untied the letters on her legs and handed them off to Sokka and Toph respectively, and then spent some time checking her over, telling her how marvelous she was, and feeding her owl treats.

“Huh. Suki and the rest of the Kyoshi warriors are working for some underground ferry to Ba Sing Se. They left their village because it got overrun by Fire Nation—Zhao’s folks. Apparently prince burnt-face showed up after and made the soldiers put out the fires they set and sent them away. They had taken Suki prisoner. He had her turned over to him and let her go. She ran into him again after they all evacuated. He was coming back from Omashu...he gave that candy you left him to her to give to the refugee kids, and warned her the war front was headed that way. They took the refugees eastward and got them all into Ba Sing Se, then took jobs as guards.”

Katara looked rather disbelieving and sulky about Suki’s experiences with Zuko. She eventually decided he’d been trying to lure her into a false sense of security, and Suki was too thick to realize it. It was obvious to her the guy was pure evil. She sighed then, and wished Jet were there—he’d agree with her. She wouldn’t mind more kissing either. She could feel herself blushing, so she quickly turned her mind to other matters. She nearly jumped out of her skin when she realized Toph was looking her way, and had a smirk on her face.

She tensed, expecting her to say something to embarrass her. Instead, all she did was hold up her letter. “Someone want to read this?”

“I’ll do it!” Katara was quick to offer, in the hopes of halting any teasing later.

Toph handed over the letter while snorting just a bit. It was obvious she knew what she was up to.

Katara read through the letter quickly and sighed.

“Just give me the gist.” Toph asked resignedly.

“It’s a lot of worrying over your health, safety and virtue, and a demand that you return at once, or let them know where you can be picked up, so you can be returned home and protected.”

Toph huffed and crossed her arms, but it was obvious she was hurt as well as upset.

“I’m sorry Toph. I’m sure they’re just worried...after all, last they heard, you were kidnapped by a scary guy in armor who tried to set their house on fire.” Aang tried to cheer her up.

“It probably doesn’t help, but he’s right. Maybe after everything is over, you can sit down and have a long talk with them, and things will change…” Harry added.

“You don’t sound like you believe that.” Toph scoffed miserably.

“I was just thinking of this family I know back home. There are seven children in the family, all of them perfectly healthy, and capable. You would think with that many kids, their mother would have her attention spread pretty thin, but no, she’s relentless, and babies all of them to the point where her two eldest sons moved to other countries to get away from her. Her eldest son is like, thirty, and she’s utterly convinced he, and the rest, can’t do anything without her, and she worries about all of them constantly. The only one who doesn’t seem to feel stifled is the youngest son, who’s kinda lazy. He doesn’t like being nagged to do chores, but she does everything else for him, so he’s quite happy to put up with it.”

“I think what he’s trying to say is that parents worry.” Sokka offered.
“The good ones anyway. Lots aren’t so lucky…or so cursed, depending on how you look at it.” Tom muttered.

“Like I was trying to say, look at it from their point of view: to a sighted person, the idea of being blind is utterly terrifying…think of how you feel when you’re not on the ground. They might eventually come around to realizing how very capable you are, or they might not. Whichever it is, just remember its coming from love and worry, however difficult it is to endure.”

“I know that…but I hate it. I hated being a prisoner, and being a secret and having people hover and talk down to me.”

“I know. I’m sorry it was like that for you. Maybe it will change. It might take some doing, and it might never be quite what you want…they’re probably still going to fuss and still going to worry, no matter what you say or do…but maybe it will ease up somewhat.”

“At least now you know your mom is still alive.” Katara offered.

“Yeah. There is that.” Toph agreed.

Azula went to the room she’d been given on the ship once they’d returned, without a word to the others. They let her go without comment—none of them really wanted to deal with her in the mood she was in.

She curled up in a ball on her bed and stared at the far wall, unseeing. She felt like she’d been stripped naked in public and ridiculed. Worse even than that, was the cold that had lodged itself deep down inside her. She had lost her battle. She had been rendered completely helpless and powerless and there had been absolutely nothing she could do about it.

A knock sounded at the door, and then the door opened before she could tell whoever it was to go away. It was Mai and Ty Lee.

“What do you two want.” She sighed listlessly.

Mai held up her hands. She had hair pins and ribbons, and Ty Lee had a brush and small mirror.

“We thought you might want to do something with your hair.”

She moped and groaned, but Ty Lee just bounced over and manhandled her into position and started brushing.

“That water tribe guy was cute, wasn’t he? Too bad the avatar’s just a little kid…he’s probably gonna be a cutie when he gets older. Heck, even those dragon spirits were cute. It makes me kinda sad there’s a war on.”

“Really Ty Lee! Can’t you think of anything else?” Azula snapped.

“Why should I? I’m young!” she giggled in reply. “Can you believe Zuko is still sulking about that
one spirit telling Mai she had pretty eyes? I don’t know what he’s so upset about…she does! And anyway, they’re really dragons or something…what’s he think he’s gonna do? Come by later and be all ‘hey there, sweet-sugarcakes, wanna take a ride on my flying carpet thing?’” she mocked in a deep voice.

“They’re dragons?” Azula repeated.

“That’s what general Iroh said.” Mai agreed. “Weird ones though, with feathers and deer horns.”

“The nerve of a bizarre dragon mocking me!” Azula seethed.

Mai cocked an eyebrow. "I think he was just trying to get under your skin."

Azula huffed and crossed her arms.

“And by the look of it, he succeeded.”

“There! All done!” Ty Lee chirped, before bouncing off the bed. “Come on, it’s music night!”

“What? Wait…why did you do it like this?”

“It’s music night—casual dress.”

Azula snatched the mirror out of her friend’s hand and stared at herself for a long moment before setting it aside.

“It looks like how my mother used to wear her hair.”

“Not quite, but similar. It looks nice. Now, come on, we don’t want to be late!”

“I think I’ll pass.”

“Aw, but it’ll be fun!”

“Run along. I don’t feel like joining music night, whatever that is.”

Mai and Ty Lee exchanged a glance and Mai started for the door.

“Suit yourself. You can always come later if you feel like it.”

“You should try to change your mind. We could all use some fun after that fight earlier.” Ty Lee added, before following Mai out the door.

She stayed there, alone, as the room gradually darkened. Outside, she could hear laughter and music. She crept towards the window, being careful to remain unseen.

Her brother, her uncle, her friends, members of the crew and several of the soldiers were down there, playing music and dancing.

She couldn’t believe them, mixing with commoners like that—there were standards to be upheld!

She smirked slightly as her brother finally had enough of the soldiers dancing with Mai, and relinquished the tsungi horn he’d been playing. It was obvious he hadn’t danced in a while…
Of course, he’d been out on this ship for the last couple of years, hadn’t he?
It was awful—so cramped and tiny, with no luxuries to be had; very different from the palace and the capital city.
Mai had been relinquished to a dull backwater Earth Kingdom colony, and Ty Lee had been wallowing with peasants in the circus. She was the only one who had been maintaining proper standards and decorum out of all of them.

So…why did all of them look happy, while she was stuck up here alone in a dark room?

Well, it isn’t like any of them really wanted her down there, did they?
Even stupid dragon spirits apparently thought she was a monster—the only one in the group requiring a scolding, even though all four of them had attacked.

Down below, Ty Lee took a break from dancing and went to lean against the rail, then gazed up at Azula’s darkened window with a pensive look on her face.
Azula ducked back out of sight, heart pounding, and wondered if she’d seen her.
It would be mortifying to be caught gazing down at all of them like a hungry sabre-dog drooling at a restaurant window.

Carefully, she peeked back outside and watched Ty Lee’s expression.
Good—it didn’t seem like she could see her.
Zuko and Mai joined her by the railing, and the two of them gazed up at her window as well, before bending their heads together to talk quietly. They eventually coaxed Ty Lee back out to join them.

She stayed there, hidden and watching until everyone but the night watch went back inside.
She waited to see if anyone would knock, but no one ever did.

When she finally went to bed, her sleep was restless and filled with nightmares of being rendered powerless, only to be chased by a variety of faceless monsters, while two dragons hovered overhead, sipping tea and making fun of her, and her brother and uncle played tsungi horns nearby. She woke in the wee hours of the morning, tossed and turned a bit, before falling back to sleep. This time, she dreamed that Mai and Ty Lee helped her get dressed up for a play she was supposed to perform in.
A lot of people she knew—former classmates, dead relatives, and numerous servants, soldiers and clerks she knew from seeing them around the palace were in it too. She was confused, because she didn’t know what was going on, and everyone was getting impatient with her. She got dressed in a silly costume and shoved out on stage without having a chance to prepare, and she didn’t know her lines, or even what the play was supposed to be about…then it changed again. She was running down a long corridor, and there was a figure in the distance that she kept chasing, but she kept disappearing around corners and staying just out of reach.
When she woke in the morning, she was exhausted, gritty-eyed and out of sorts.

“What on earth are you doing?” Tom asked curiously.
“I’m making bison-fur thread, what’s it look like?” Harry answered with serene aplomb.
Appa groaned in agreement.

Aang and the others gathered around Tom to see what he was looking at, and found Harry seated next to several deep piles of white fluff. A large wooden spool was hovering in front of him and spinning, while he fed thread onto it from a looping pile of the stuff that was on the ground next to
“Appa’s started shedding” he explained “And he’s so big, and his fur’s so thick, that he’s shedding a lot. I brushed out his fur and I got great piles of loose stuff, and I thought to myself, you know, that could probably make for incredibly warm soft material if I could make something out of it. So, with that in mind, I’ve been making thread out of the piles of fur. I have ten big spools of the stuff already, and spring isn’t even here yet.”

“Wow…and I thought Aang was in touch with his feminine side.” Toph chortled.

“Seriously man…you do hair, you make jewelry, now you’re sitting around making thread…”

“I can still kick your ass with one hand tied behind my back, and I’m secure enough in my masculinity to realize that having skills outside eating meat and swinging a sword around do not make me unmanly.” Harry replied placidly.

“I’m going to go start breakfast.” Katara announced.

“Come on, Twinkletoes, we can get some practice in while she’s busy.”

“I’m going to go hunting.” Sokka announced before hightailing it out of there. It was like he thought ‘unmanly pursuits’ might be catching.

Harry finished spooling up the thread he was winding and set it aside, before pulling his wand and pointing it at another of the piles of fur. The loose fur wriggled and formed itself into a piled, continuous length of thread. Harry transfigured another of the fallen branches he’d gathered into a large, wooden spool, stuck the end of the thread on it with a sticking charm and then set it to hovering and spinning in place, while he guided the thread to wind onto it smoothly. Tom watched for a while and then decided to help by transfiguring another of the loose piles of fur and getting it stored on a spool as well. Harry flashed him a brief grin and went back to watching his own thread.

Hedwig had been sent off early that morning with a letter to the Earth King. She’d been instructed to approach him when he was alone if possible, to better expedite getting an answer. The weather was getting warmer each day, so they whiled away the hours with practice, sparring, lounging around and swimming in the pond they were camped near. It was so peaceful where they were, it was hard sometimes to remember there was a war still going on elsewhere—which, now that he thought on it, was probably why Zuko had shown up again. He seemed to show up anytime they got complacent, or settled in one place too long.

Hedwig returned three days later with an oddly cheerful acceptance letter, which seemed to have been written by the Earth King himself, inviting them to stay in the palace when they arrived, and offering to let them meet his pet bear, Bosco. He seemed really excited by the prospect of meeting some new people, and taking part in a weird ‘avatar dance ritual’ of renewal, and went on to explain that it sounded a lot more interesting than the religious rituals he himself had to perform. The guy sounded bored…and lonely. Well, they did say it was lonely at the top.

They packed up their camp when the spring equinox was two weeks away, and started for Ba Sing Se to visit the Earth King—and Suki. The ferry port where she was working was on the way.
The ferry port, their first stop, was hidden in the center of Chameleon Bay, which the peninsula they were on bordered. Knowing this, Aang turned Appa to the coastline to follow it up. That was when they realized there were other familiar faces but Suki’s in the area.

“It’s dad! It’s one of our camps! I didn’t know they were out here.” Sokka pointed.

“I guess it makes sense, really. A large portion of the Fire Nation navy was wiped out, so whatever ships they have are going to be used to best effect, one would assume. Ba Sing Se is the last great stronghold of the Earth Kingdom. It would be logical to assume they’d be sending troops this way to try conquering it again. If that’s the case, your dad and the others guarding the approach would become very important. All the earthbenders that got rescued elsewhere can add their strength to the ground forces to supplement the army.”

Harry mused.

The men in the camp had seen them, and were now gathering on the shore to wave. Katara leaned over the side, scanning the ground intently, only to sit back on her heels a few moments later looking disappointed.

“I don’t see any of the Freedom Fighters.”

“They’re most effective as guerilla forces. Unless they’re battling individual soldiers on the ships, they’d be kind of wasted here, well, all of them except Longshot since he can hit you from a distance. They probably went with the army after we saw them last.” Sokka realized.

“That makes sense I guess.” Katara replied in a disappointed voice.

Aang landed Appa, and Harry the carpet he and Tom were riding on, a short distance from the camp, which was on a sheltered beach bordering the Bay.

Chief Hakoda came out to greet them.

“Kids, what are you doing here? Are there more bases in the area we don’t know about?”

“Um, none that we know of. We’re on our way to Ba Sing Se. The Earth King has invited us to stay in the palace. The Spring Equinox is coming up and we’re going to dance again. It should be interesting.” Aang told him.

“The Earth King? How did you manage that? From what I’ve been told you can be left cooling your heels for as much a six months trying to get an audience with him!” Hakoda said in surprise. “I’ve heard a lot of disturbing things about the city…” he added in a low voice.

“Anything you can tell us would be helpful. What I know of the place is mostly from the little I was able to see in Wan Shi Tong’s library before we were forced to flee.” Harry offered.

“Wan Shi Tong? The great knowledge spirit? I thought his fabulous library was only a myth.” One of the older tribesmen asked in interest.

“It was mostly buried beneath the desert. Unfortunately…I kinda managed to piss him off, and he sorta took it back to the spirit world.” Sokka admitted shamefaced.

“It sounds like you have a lot to tell us.”

They didn’t have long to share their adventures with one another—the men had been about to set out.
on a patrol, as they’d gotten word more ships were headed their way. They were able to share the
gist of what had happened when they’d seen each other last.

“We really should be going, so I’ll tell you the little bit I’ve heard about Ba Sing Se. It doesn’t sound
like a good place. The Earth King is a figurehead. The real power in Ba Sing Se is Long Feng, head
of the Dai Li. King Kuei’s family were assassinated in an uprising when he was four. He was the
only survivor. He was raised by Long Feng, who uses his position as most trusted to rule the city
with an iron fist. It’s quite likely the king has no idea a war has been going on for the last hundred
years; he’s supposedly never been out of the palace in his life. The official position among the
populace is that there is no war. I’ve heard it said that anyone within the walls who dares suggest
otherwise disappears. If they ever resurface, they’re different.”

“What are the Dai Li, exactly?” Katara asked worriedly.

“They’re an elite corps of earth benders that are supposed to protect the cultural heritage of the city or
something. That’s what they were supposed to be, anyway. These days, they seem to be something
else. Like I said, I’ve heard a lot of disturbing things, and even out here, far from the city or the reach
of the Dai Li, all that is said is said in whispers while people look over their shoulders as though
expecting one of them to pop out and drag them away. Promise me you’ll all be careful.”

“We will” Harry assured him. “If things are as you’ve said, the fact that we will be there as the king’s
personal guests should protect us somewhat. This Long Feng obviously needs the king to some
extent to maintain the authority of his control on the city.”

“It would be best” Tom offered, catching the eyes of the others “if we spoke no word of the war, of
the Dai Li, or of anything of any importance.”

The others looked ready to object, so he held up a hand to quell them.

“From what I’ve been told of your experiences at autumn and winter, we won’t have to say
anything. The king will learn all we don’t tell him during the dance, and it will be much more
effective. If we simply behave ourselves and let ourselves be gracious guests with interesting stories
to tell, the secret police will watch and wait but make no move. When we speak of the equinox
dance, tell him it opens your mind to the cosmos or something, but make it seem like a lot of spiritual
mumbo-jumbo. Let him do the talking as much as possible, ask him about what he does on a normal
day, ask for tours of the palace, ask about his pet bear. Let the Dai Li relax their vigilance and
dismiss us all as anything important. By the time the dance is started it will be too late.”

“We should also watch what we say when we’re alone. If we mention the dance at all, just be
cheerful about how much fun it will all be…make sure we know we’re really alone and unobserved
before speaking anything real. It would probably be best if we only arrived a few days before the
equinox, so there’s less time for things to go wrong. Afterwards, we’ll have to play things by ear.”

Harry added.

“It’s good advice kids, please listen to it.” Hakoda added.

He embraced his children one after the other, and they said their goodbyes, before once again going
their separate ways.

They stayed on the beach and waved the men off as they left, then gathered around to make further
plans based on what they now knew.

“I already don’t like the sound of the place, but then, I never thought I’d like it there. My family
owns several shipping concerns, very successful ones, so we do business with Ba Sing Se.
Everything there is regulated, and just getting goods to and from the place is a real nightmare. They have rules and laws for everything. The city itself is made up of three rings, segregated by class. The lower ring is the farmers, artisans and such; poor folks, folks who work with their hands, regular people. The middle ring is the well-to-do merchant families, the university, the middle class, quite literally. The upper ring is the very rich, the nobles, the government buildings and the Earth King’s palace. Folks from the upper rings can travel lower—most probably choose not to. Folks from the lower ring can travel to the middle if they want to have a fancy night out, but they probably couldn’t afford to do so very often. Folks from the lower rings really aren’t allowed in the upper ring unless they have a specific purpose for being there. That’s all I really know. Like I said, not my kind of place. It sounds like all the worst parts of being home expanded a hundredfold.”

“Doesn’t sound like a place I’d like much either.” Aang shuddered. Air nomads were all about equality, community and freedom—such a rigidly defined place sounded no more appealing to him than it did to Toph.

Sokka and Katara looked no more happy about what they’d heard. They’d found the North Pole to be somewhat stifling, and yet it sounded like it had nothing on Ba Sing Se. Harry and Tom were the only ones who weren’t too worried; though London wasn’t quite the same, it was probably a lot closer than anything the rest of them had experienced. From the sound of it, it was a ‘magical city’—built, maintained and ruled by earthbenders—that had incorporated all the worst aspects of sprawling muggle metropolises—laws, rules and regulations for everything, pervasive surveillance, and probably mountains of paperwork on top of it to keep everything functioning. Rather like their own ministry in fact, in these modern times.

“We should probably stick together as much as possible…and not completely tip our hands. Tom, help me get Appa’s saddle off. I really should have thought to do this sooner, but I kept bringing out the carpet instead to save him the extra weight. Oh well, no time like the present…”

Tom eyed him in confusion for a moment, but then his expression cleared. “Permanent featherweight charm? Good idea, especially if that other girl we’re meeting decides to join us as well.”

“She’s captain of a team of six or seven, I forget which. It would be a tight fit, but it would help if we’re prepared for any eventuality.”

“What are you guys doing?”

“We’re going to make it easier for Appa to carry all of us. Bleargh!”

Big gobs of fur showered down on them as they pulled the saddle off.

“While we’re doing that, why don’t you guys brush Appa out again. Make piles of the fur you get. I’ll pack it away and deal with it later. I’m really curious what cloth made out of it will feel like. Too bad I don’t have a loom handy…of course, I don’t really have enough spools of thread yet to make any sort of decent thread count…”

“Weird, weird guy.” Sokka sighed as he took one of the giant brushes Harry’d made to get to work. Tom made a couple more for Katara and Toph, and then joined Harry to discuss how best to embed the featherweight charm on the saddle.

Tom did some calculations in the wet sand by the water’s edge and then mapped out how best to lay out the runes and what sequence. They used their wands to carefully burn the runes into the leather. The others actually got done brushing Appa before they were done and stood around to watch. Aang, especially, watched in interest as he had been flying Appa, and so hadn’t witnessed the runes engaging when Harry had made Toph’s bracelet.
While Harry went to gather up Appa’s fur and make a few more spools to hold it when he was done—all of which he packed away in the fanny pack he’d made to hold explosives before—the others stared at the faintly shimmering symbols etched across Appa’s saddle with bemusement.

“So…what does this do, exactly?”

“I can show you, actually.” Tom offered. He flipped the saddle over and told Sokka, Katara and Toph to climb in, and had Aang go to the other side from Tom.

“Alright, grab the end there and lift on three.”

“Uh…okay…” Aang replied uncertainly. He could lift huge boulders through a combination of muscles and earth bending, but otherwise, he wasn’t all that strong, and Tom had few muscles at all. He really didn’t see how they were going to pick everyone up.

Tom just smirked at him and grabbed the saddle end nearest him with one hand. “One, two…three.”

Aang lifted, and it wasn’t that heavy at all—not much heavier than say hefting a heavy backpack.

“Wow. You made the saddle weird!”

“Those are some handy glowy letters you guys know.” Sokka whistled.

“So, that’s what you guys’ powers are? You can just change the properties of things?” Katara asked curiously.

“More or less.” Tom agreed blandly. Toph cocked her head towards him, but didn’t argue, though she knew he wasn’t telling them everything.

“So, every time Harry said he wasn’t a bender, and that he wasn’t controlling the wind to make the carpet or his broom fly…”

“I could have told you that.” Aang interjected. “He isn’t pulling on the air. He even said outright that he couldn’t fly, the things he was on could.”

“That’s freaky, but kinda cool.” Sokka admitted.

“Say…does that mean any of us could fly the carpet?”

“I don’t know, actually. Did any of you ever try?” Tom wondered.

“No. Hey, Harry!”

“You rang?”

Aang busied himself getting Appa’s saddle back on, with Toph’s help. Aang could call the winds and fly already, he could surf on the water and make slides in the water on command, and he could use earth to propel himself at high speeds, on top of being able to run very fast with the aid of his airbending already. Toph, though Harry’s gift helped, felt most secure with her feet firmly on the ground.

“Can I try your broom and see if I can make it fly? Please?” Sokka begged.

“Alright. We’ll see if we can get it to answer you first, and if you can, I’ll give you a quick lesson before I let you actually try to fly it. My friend Neville panicked and fell from a good height the first time he tried and broke his wrist.”
That calmed Sokka’s enthusiasm somewhat, but not entirely.

Harry laid the broom down on the ground.

“Hold your hand over it and say ‘up’.”

“Up.”

Sokka’s shoulders sagged.

“Try again. Let go of your doubts and be firm. Believe it will work. You have to connect with it somewhat. It’s not sentient, but it does have a sort of, I don’t know, awareness. That’s really the best way I can explain it. It twitched. It wouldn’t have done that if you couldn’t connect with it somewhat. Trust me, a lot of folks during my flying lessons had that kind of reaction, while others had the thing practically jump into their hand.”

Sokka nodded, let out a deep breath and reminded himself that he knew the thing could fly—he’d seen it.

“UP!”

The broom sailed into his hand. It didn’t jump like it had for Harry, it rose a lot more sluggishly, but it did rise, which was what was important.

Seeing Sokka’s success, Katara danced in place and asked if she could fly the carpet. Harry sighed and upacked it, and left Tom to instruct her on its use while he monitored Sokka.

Once they were cleared for their first solo flight, they both sped out over the water, faces alight. They spent some time testing the boundaries of the item they were on, and then swapped. Once they were comfortable, they started doing tricks and having races.

They ended up having to set up camp nearby and spending the night, as the siblings were both so enthralled with being able to fly sort of on their own that the sky was edging towards twilight before they were done.

“Oh, man! That was so great! Hey, can I fly to Ba Sing Se? I’ll be careful with it, promise!”

“Remember I said earlier that we should stick together and not tip our hands too much? To put it bluntly, I want everyone in Ba Sing Se to think we’re all dependent on Appa, and only on Appa, to leave the city or travel within it.”

“Why though? Wouldn’t it be more impressive if we came in all of us flying and whatnot?” Sokka wheedled.

“He’s right, it would probably be a bad idea to let them know we have other resources at our command. A place like that, based on laws, rules, regulations and control would take our being able to just flit away from their hold as a personal affront almost. It will protect us as well. If they think we cannot escape their hold without Appa, they’ll post a discreet guard on him, and tell themselves that if we upset them, they can just put him somewhere we can’t get to him, and we’ll be helpless to leave and escape their judgment.” Tom agreed.

“No one better touch Appa!” Aang growled with real heat.

“They probably won’t, not so long as we play by their rules. The illusion of control will be enough to keep that from happening. If you’re at all worried about how he’s faring, simply remind the Earth King how much he means to you and invite him to visit him with you. Make sure you’re nice to his
pet bear as well. From the sound of his letter, that bear sounds like he’s his only friend.” Toph added.

The gang set out early the next morning on Appa, to the ferry port to Ba Sing Se that was hidden in Full Moon Bay, where Suki and the rest of the Kyoshi warriors were working. The place had somehow remained beneath Fire Nation notice thus far, and was the destination of the many, many refugees that had fled eastwards to escape Fire Nation incursion into their homes and villages.

The port itself was a massive, walled structure, surrounded on all sides by high cliffs, which left but a small opening large enough for the ships to pass through on one side. Appa’s arrival was cause for a bit of excitement among the downtrodden refugees down below. Aang smiled and waved, but he could see from the sadness in his eyes that he was feeling guilty. These people had their lives uprooted and were huddled here hoping for some safe place they could hide, and meanwhile, all of them had been vacationing and idling away the hours in peaceful meadows and going swimming.

What they guessed were the Kyoshi warriors, came out to greet them. Instead of their dramatic makeup and warrior garb, they were wearing what were probably the uniforms of the guards at the station. Suki still had the same big eyes and heart shaped face regardless, and it completely lit up when Sokka slid off Appa to greet them. Their reunion could have been a scene in a movie, with her running to him, only to be swept up and spun in a circle.

“Wow…you look different without the makeup.”

“Good different or bad different?”

“Good. Definitely good.”

They sat in a big circle on the ground outside the ferry port and spent some time catching up. Suki agreed to go with them to visit the Earth King and take part in the ‘sacred dance ritual’. Personally, Harry was happy for her presence on the trip. She was a warrior, and could be depended upon to keep the warnings in mind, and stick to the plan they’d sketched out to govern their stay in the palace. What’s more, she’d be an extra hand to make sure the others remembered. He wasn’t worried about Toph overmuch, though all bets were off if she got over excited or pissed off. Sokka, Katara and Aang were all going to be just a little out of their depth—not their fault, but the places and manner they’d all grown up in were very very different from a big city ruled by a totalitarian government and secret police.

Suki ran off to grab her stuff and get suited up, and returned not too long afterwards, once again in the uniform of a Kyoshi warrior. She said her goodbyes to her warriors and promised to return soon. They stayed where they were to wave them off and returned back to work.

As they were taking off, Harry noted that Tom was smiling contentedly. He seemed quite happy to have Suki along. That’s when Harry realized—there were now seven of them. Tom was big on sevens—the most magical number and all.

It was a rather ironic comment on how much things had changed that the former Dark Lord Voldemort would greet the addition of a muggle girl in a crazy get-up as a good omen.

Thinking it over, Harry realized it really was. They now had three benders, including all the elements they’d covered thus far and the one they’d be covering with the coming equinox, two muggles, a boy and a girl, who were comfortable enough with ‘magic’ to not run screaming into the night or start
building pyres, and two wizards. The fact that they had a magically significant number on top of that was just icing on the cake.

He suddenly felt much more relaxed about their trip.

“But where are you going?”

“That’s not your concern, brother dear. You just focus on harrying the avatar, maybe you’ll get lucky one of these days. Mai, Ty Lee and I are just going to take care of a little side project, that’s all.”

Zuko sighed and caught Mai’s apologetic, wry smile. They all knew how Azula could get when she wanted something. Poor Ty Lee looked cheerfully resigned to being dragged along on whatever mad quests Azula got it into her head to go on, until she got bored or decided to head home.

Azula had been standoffish and pensive since their run-in with the avatar. She’d hidden away in her room when they’d gotten back, and then asked Zuko to drop her and girls off somewhere the next day. Lieutenant Jee had been quick to comply once Zuko gave the okay—he was pretty sure the man wanted them off his ship—though given that the crew and soldiers were sharing tighter quarters than usual because of Azula’s insistence on travelling with them, he thought that was understandable.

He didn’t know what she was planning or where she was taking the girls—she’d been somewhat tight-lipped about her plans. All he knew was that she’d had them run them to the Serpent’s Pass.

He was, he could admit, a tiny bit concerned—there’d been something brittle about her since their disastrous run-in with the avatar and company. He’d hoped that if not himself, perhaps Ty Lee or Mai would be able to get her to talk about whatever was going on in that crazy little head of hers, but they’d had no more luck than he had.

Resigned to hearing about it later, if at all, he just had the mongoose-dragons unloaded and said his goodbyes. As nice as it was to see everyone, he could be honest enough to admit he wanted them off his ship as well—Azula had gotten very used to throwing her weight around in the time he’d been gone, but it was his ship, not hers, and he gave the orders. She hadn’t liked not being top dog, but was unsure enough of her hold on his men to be wary of trying to take over, which was a small mercy.

He’d never have forgiven her instigating a mutiny on his ship.

That had been a couple of days ago. They were currently sailing around the southeastern Earth Kingdom, while he tried to figure out what to do next. If he couldn’t capture the avatar with the girls’ help, he had very little chance of doing it by himself, even with uncle’s help.

“This aimless sailing isn’t particularly productive, Prince Zuko.”

“I know. I’m just confused and…I don’t know what to do next.” He admitted.

“Perhaps some quiet contemplation will help you decipher what your next move should be. It will also give us time and space to complete your firebending training. You’ve made great strides recently, and I really think you will be able to successfully complete learning the last of the advanced forms, plus an extra that only the royal family can do. Let us simply continue on as we are for a bit then, without making concrete plans.”
“An extra? I don’t remember ever hearing of an extra.”

“You left Fire Nation and the Royal palace when you were still quite young and hadn’t yet mastered the basics, nephew. I don’t know how successful you will be in learning it while you are still in such turmoil, but I will teach you the way of it, and even if you cannot perform it right now, I believe you will be able to once you’ve found peace of mind.”

“Fine, let’s do that then.”

“This…this is unreal.”

Sokka spoke for all of them. The city of Ba Sing Se was a marvel of engineering, size and grandeur. It was, without any doubt, the most densely populated spot in the whole world, given what they’d seen of it thus far. Even Tom and Harry were somewhat impressed with sheer presence of the place, though they were less daunted than the others were, given what their own world was like.

They had spent a few hours crossing miles upon miles of farmland after crossing the boundary of the outer wall. The outer wall was a marvel all on its own—Harry seriously doubted even the ‘Great Wall of China’ back home stood anywhere near it in comparison, and you could see that from space, he’d been told!

After passing the endless farmlands that spread throughout the expanses between the outer wall and the outskirts, their first view of the city proper came into view.

“I didn’t think there could be this many people in the world, let alone in one place.” Katara murmured.

She had found the Northern Water Tribe stronghold to be mind-bogglingly massive and crowded… you could probably fit a couple hundred of them just in the space that housed the farms! Then, the city itself…she couldn’t imagine it. It made her feel closed in just looking down at it from up high like they were. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of little houses dotted the landscape—the lower ring, with its brown-tiled roof and winding streets, that were densely packed with more people than she could even fathom. The slightly smaller middle ring, with its dark green roofs was just as daunting, though not quite as mind-boggling after seeing the mass of humanity in the lower ring. The houses were spaced a bit more, the streets were a bit wider, and there were little parks and gardens spaced throughout it, even a few little ponds.

The inner ring with its golden-tiled roofs was the smallest of the three, with the most space and greenery and the widest streets. Even just that part by itself made the grand and impressive Northern Water Tribe fortress look like a tiny, insignificant backwater. Even here, there were more people than she’d ever seen in one place before, though there were fewer—far fewer—than there had been in either of the other two rings. Here, most of the houses were larger and more grandiose than any of the houses or buildings they’d seen on their way in, and the people were dressed in finery, with elaborate hairdos bedecked with flowers, jewelry and ornaments of all sorts, wearing silks and embroidery the likes of which she’d never seen before. There were far more gardens and parks, each of them filled with flowers and trees that filled the air with perfume.

At the center of all this, in the middle of the inner ring, stood the Earth King’s palace.

Even that was practically a city in itself, filled with massive buildings inside a walled complex, on
top of a high peak with huge steps leading up to it. The center courtyard was filled with a huge
garden with winding pathways, man-made lakes, streams and rivers, with arched bridges crossing
them, dotted with fancy miniature pavilions. All around that were buildings filled with hundreds of
people, many wearing uniforms of one sort or another, all of them bustling to and fro, looking busy
and important.

She had thought it odd when her father said the king had never been out of the palace, and had in her
own mind, been picturing an elderly invalid—she couldn’t imagine someone who never left their
house in their whole life being otherwise. Seeing the size of the ‘house’, it began to make a bit more
sense.

She thought that, had they come in by the ground, rode one of the huge earth-bender powered trains
into the city, she would still have been impressed and overwhelmed, but that it would have been
easier to dismiss, because she would have only been able to see a small part of the whole at any one
time.

Seeing it all laid out beneath her like this, where you could see nothing but the city for as far as the
eye could see in every direction, even with as high up as they were… it made her feel very tiny and
insignificant indeed.

It wasn’t a feeling she much cared for.

Harry and Tom were both watching all of them as they drank in the city below them. It was sort of
amusing, the sheer shock and awe on their faces.

Sokka glanced at them and saw their amusement, and then looked down at the city below with new
eyes.

“It’s like this, isn’t it? Where you’re from?”

“Yeah. There’s probably only a few places that really rival the sheer amount of people stuffed in to
one place, but there are hundreds of other cities all over the world that are nearly as big, and all of
them are surrounded by thousands of towns that range in size from the hundred thousands in
population, down to the tens of thousands. There are still open spaces—farms, forests, a few prairies
and deserts, mountain ranges…but yeah, most of the spaces in between look more like this than they
do anywhere else we’ve been since we’ve been here. There are still some small villages here and
there throughout the world, but many of them have either expanded in recent years because some
industry or other moved there and brought people in, or have vanished because all the work left.”

“How could the work leave?” Suki laughed.

“Say it was a big fishing area; if you have hundreds of boats out catching huge nets full of fish all
the time…eventually the fish in the area run out. Say the big industry was logging. Once all the
forests in the area are gone, guess what? All the people working in the saw mills, paper mills and
what have you that were in the area to process the lumber are out of work. Say mining was the big
industry. Mines only hold so much of whatever it is you’re after—whether it be coal, gold,
diamonds, oil…; when the mines dry up, all the industries in the area that were making a living
processing whatever it is no longer have anything to do. The people who got rich off whatever it
was, because they owned the mines, or the logging rights or the fishing rights, just go somewhere
new to continue, but the folks working in the factories as laborers are out of luck. They suddenly
have no jobs, no money, no food. If they’re lucky, there’s jobs available somewhere nearby.”
“If you’re always getting enough fish, lumber, gold or whatever for this many people, all over…” Suki trailed off.

“Yeah, stuff starts running out. Given time, forests will grow back, but played out mines don’t just regurgitate more of whatever was in them. Scarce resources and overpopulation are going to become and increasing problem where we’re from.”

“We’re at the palace. It looks like they’re expecting us.” Aang called back over his shoulder.

“Showtime.” Toph muttered.

The palace guards watched rather tensely as Appa flew in to land on the wide stone expanse that bordered the front entrance to the palace, but they didn’t attack. They simply lined up on either side in formation and watched with wary eyes. As they flew in, they could see a couple of guys creeping around on the nearest rooftops, watching them unseen by the soldiers below.

Great, just great. If those guys were Dai Li, then they were apparently elite, earthbending ninjas. Just what they needed.

It made him all the more thankful they’d gone over the rules and whatnot a couple of times in different ways before coming here. Their youth, or apparent youth in Tom’s case, would come in handy. People often saw what they wanted to see. A septet of youngsters would disarm most, if not all, the shady characters in town.

Aang, he was happy to see, was keeping to the plan so far. He hopped off Appa’s head and stood with pride, staff in hand, and waited till the rest of them disembarked before making any moves. The rest of them formed up behind him—Suki and Toph at either shoulder, Sokka and Katara behind them, with Harry and Tom bringing up the rear.

Once they had formed up, Aang looked around at the waiting guards and waited for someone to approach.

“Avatar?” the guy in charge finally ventured to speak.

“Yes, I am avatar Aang. I believe the Earth King is expecting myself and my companions.”

“Yes, avatar, he told us to watch for your arrival. If yourself and your companions will follow me?”

Aang gave a slight, regal nod and said no more. The guard set off into the palace, with all of them at his heels. They entered inside and into a large, cavernous entryway, and then down through various doors and hallways, on what Harry assumed was a route meant to confuse them so they would be left at the mercy of servants and the like to guide them within the complex. Or maybe it was more than that. Time and again, they saw glimpses of people hurrying past half open doorways down adjacent hallways. Maybe the meandering route was also meant to give everyone time to get the Earth King in place and set the stage to impress.

The interior was quite impressive, and everything was on the grand scale they’d been expecting, given what the rest of the city looked like. The ceilings towered far overhead, the doors between were twenty or thirty feet high. In some of the larger rooms, huge pillars as thick as a sequoia peppered the expanse. The earth kingdom’s preferred colors of green, yellow, tan, brown, and white were used throughout. Furnishings and decorations were sparse, but tasteful where they appeared.

Harry found it somewhat difficult to enjoy it too much—he could feel what he assumed were other Dai Li here and there, hidden up on pillars or just behind walls, watching them. It was kind of creepy.
After what seemed a ridiculously long walk, the guard finally led them to a massive set of doors that were probably fifty, if not a hundred feet, tall, and banged on it three times in a slow, measured pace.

The massive doors swung open silently and they were led into the most cavernous room yet. It was empty but for a stepped dais at the far end, upon which sat the king. He was a young man, who looked to be in his late twenties or so, dressed in green and yellow robes. There were guards stationed evenly throughout the edges of the room, and two stood to either side at the base of the dais.

The guard led them, with all due solemnity, forward across the room. They were about halfway across, when a small doorway opened in the wall to the left, and a man with a long braid down his back in a long robe, with a creepy little moustache and goatee entered, followed by two of the fellows he’d seen on the roof, entered and glided forward, before coming to a halt just to the side of the dais, but between them, the guards…and the king.

Harry was rather proud of everyone. They didn’t gawk or fidget or crane their heads around. They continued following the guard, and Aang, forward.

When the guard stopped, he dropped to his knees and pressed his forehead to the floor.

All of them had discussed at length how best to handle meeting the king and what they should do so far as protocol. In the end, they decided that Toph and Suki would copy whatever the person who led them in did.

Sokka, Katara, Harry and Tom would bow low enough to convey respect, but no lower. They were not subjects of the Earth King, and therefore should not do the same as the Earth King’s subjects. Technically, Suki wasn’t either, but she was a good sport and agreed to mirror Toph for symmetry’s sake, and to highlight the fact that no one was being disrespectful.

Aang, as the avatar, was the balance between nations, and was not the subject or subordinate of any earthly king or power. They decided that, to highlight this fact, that he should nod his head a very tiny bit to convey respect, while reminding the king that he was not a subject of his, and was to be considered an equal—if not superior—to the earth king.

Sokka and Katara had thought it was all terribly silly to worry over such things, but Toph had put her foot down and explained how serious people would take such minor things, and how necessary it was to do such things to make a firm statement to set the tone of the rest of their visit.

“You want to highlight the fact that you’re foreign, without rubbing people’s faces in it, to remind them that you might do things differently, and that allowances have to be made for different customs. It’s a subtle way to remind anyone who needs reminding that there is a world outside the city, and that we cannot simply be made to disappear with impunity. Should they choose to move on us, it won’t mean a whole lot, but it may well be enough to keep them from acting when they might have otherwise.” she explained.

Sokka and Katara had been convinced, as had Aang. When the guard dropped to his knees, Suki and Toph were a half-second behind him. Sokka, Katara, Harry and Tom all bowed from the waist and held it. Aang waited a beat and inclined his head the slightest bit, before standing tall and proud once more.

The Earth King blinked, the guy off to the side, who they all guessed was probably Long Feng, head of the Dai Li, narrowed his eyes.

The king finally lifted his hand slightly. The guard, Suki and Toph rose, the rest straightened.

“Welcome avatar, and company, to Ba Sing Se. We hope you enjoy your stay.”
“Thank you, your majesty, both for your welcome and your hospitality.” Aang answered graciously.

“Rooms have been prepared for yourself and your entourage.”

“Thank you, it’s very much appreciated. It was a long trip.”

A doorway opened to the right and a functionary stepped through, bowed low to the king, and then beckoned them to follow.
All of them but Aang bowed again—all from the waist this time—before turning to follow.

They were led on another meandering walk to another part of the palace. There was a bit more color here, though it was subtle. Faint hints of red, blue, and saffron were worked into the decorative borders and into the wall hangings, even the stone had flecks of color other than green, though they were faint and sparse throughout the area. The occasional vase, chair or table that appeared also bore such colors—probably of foreign make, unless he missed his guess.

He probably wouldn’t have noticed ordinarily, but they jumped out after their absence everywhere else. These were probably the diplomatic guest quarters, a reminder of days when they might have occasionally had diplomats. Given how rigid and traditional the city was supposed to be, they had never gotten rid of them, even if there seemed no need—which worked out nicely for all of them. Even nicer, their suite looked out over a small enclosed garden, beyond which was what might be the courtyard garden they had seen on their arrival. Very nice indeed. There was even a whole troop of maids and the like who lined up and stood at attention behind their guide when they were shown to their rooms.

“His majesty will be expecting you this evening at a banquet to welcome you to our humble city, oh avatar.” The man subtly looked around for any evidence of luggage, beyond the small bags most of them had on hand.

“If you would allow us to unpack your belongings, we will see to it that your clothing is laid out and ready for tonight.”

“We haven’t any luggage, or any formal robes. I’m afraid what you see is what you get.” Aang joked.

It was almost funny, the faint expressions of horror on the maids faces.

“In that case, I will send someone to you to see you fitted properly.” Their guide continued without missing a beat. When you are ready” he indicated a hanging rope in the corner of the room “please signal, and one of the girls will show you and your entourage to the palace spa, so that you may refresh yourselves and prepare. Someone will meet you there to see to your wardrobe.”

Aang glanced at all of them.

“That sounds lovely. I suppose there’s no real need to wait. It would be a shame to track any dust from our travels into the lovely room his majesty has seen fit to provide us with.”

“Very good, sir. If you would.”

Everyone set down their small travel bags, weapons, Aang his glider, though he asked the maids to leave it be as it was an antique and very dear to him. Harry left behind his fanny pack (now filled with spools of bison-fur thread made en route), and his belt pouch. The latter was small enough, and laden with enough anti-theft charms, that he wasn’t too worried about anyone absconding with it. To anyone who tried messing with it, they would just remember it being empty, and best left alone and where they found it.
He had left his spare wand in there, and given the extra holster to Tom, as it could be worn on the wrist and was laden with charms to make it unnoticeable. Neither wanted to leave themselves defenseless.

They were led on another long, meandering journey, and this time separated—boys to one side, girls to the other. He had to wonder what the ladies’ side was like, because even for the men there were baths, steam rooms, masseuses, manicurists, hairdressers, barbers. If nothing else, they were certainly going to live in style while they were here.

They were directed first to a room where they were instructed to remove their clothing. The guide waited until they were clothed in the light robes the spa provided, and then called in maids to take away their clothing so it could be washed and spruced up, before being returned to their rooms later. Once the maids were gone, another flurry of people arrived and began measuring everyone and taking notes. After that was done, they were led to the baths.

Harry didn’t know how they managed it without magic, but new clothing was delivered to them about an hour before the banquet was due to start.

For Aang, they had found saffron colored material. He looked a bit choked up when he saw them. Once he was dressed, Harry understood—they had made traditional air nomad robes for him, like those worn in the temple by the senior monks. He’d seen enough pictures to recognize them.

Sokka was given dark blue with silvery-white trim. The pants and sleeveless tunic weren’t much different from what he’d been wearing when he arrived, other than the material, and the pants being a bit fuller, but there was also a long sleeved robe that went overtop that had a subtle pattern of waves worked into it.

Harry and Tom had obviously confused them—they’d both been wearing wizard robes from home when they’d arrived. They had given them both full-legged pants that gathered at the ankle that were crème colored with a faint hint of yellow, and matching long sleeved shirts, and for overtop, a long sleeveless robe with a mandarin collar that buttoned all the way down the front to just above the knees, which was slit on both sides, made of dark brown silk with orange undertones and gold trim—they were actually quite lovely, though it wasn’t a color either Tom or Harry normally wore—which was actually rather a pity in Tom’s case, as it looked good on him. He figured they must have decided ‘when in doubt, just show they’re here with the avatar’. They’d even been provided shoes—soft indoor slippers that matched their clothing, ornaments for their topknots—which they were all given, there were even prayer beads with an air nomad symbol for Aang.

The girls, when they appeared, were breathtaking—all three of them.

Katara was also in blue silk, a mandarin collared cheongsam, slit high on the sides, and full-legged pants underneath with the same wave pattern as on Sokka’s outfit. She had left her hair out of its braid so it hung down her back in a riot of waves and wild curls, though the front and top had been formed into an elaborate braided topknot that incorporated her hair loopies. There was subtle make-up on her face that highlighted her natural beauty.

Suki and Toph were dressed in green and yellow silk respectively—Earth Kingdom colors, wearing long dresses that were form fitting on top, with full skirts that brushed the floor, and long full sleeves. Their hair was done up with the ornaments and headpieces they’d seen the ladies of Ba Sing Se sporting on their way in and their look was completed with make-up, dangling earrings, and fans.

“You all look lovely. We’ll be the envy of everyone for having the honor to escort what are sure to be the three most beautiful girls there.” Tom interjected smoothly.
“Yeah…what he said.” Sokka muttered, still staring at Suki.

Toph squirmed a bit in her finery, before subsiding with a sigh.

“I hope you appreciate the sacrifices I make for you, Twinkletoes.”

“I do Toph, always.” Aang laughed.

“If you would follow me?” their guide asked officiously, once everyone had been cleaned up to his satisfaction.

Once again, they formed up behind Aang, and took another meandering trip through the palace, this time to the banquet hall.

The room was already filled with people, all of them dressed to the nines, mingling and exchanging small talk. A guard by the door banged his staff three times when they reached the doorway, and the crowd quieted while peering curiously at the door.

“Avatar Aang”

The crowd began to clap and babble excitedly. Aang smiled nervously at the crowd, before visibly getting hold of himself and trying to look serious and dignified.

They could all see the crowd was beyond curious about who the rest of them were, but apparently none of them was important enough to merit a special announcement. Harry had a feeling they were all going to be kept busy answering questions all night. Their group broke off into twos once they reached the hall, while Aang continued on alone, and began circulating through the crowd. Most of the folks started putting themselves in Aang’s path, eager to see the avatar up close, but others started making their way casually to intercept the rest of them.

Yep, they were in for a long night. He just hoped everyone remembered the plan.
Azula and company ready the giant drill and set out to conquer Ba Sing Se. The gaang and the Earth king gather together to celebrate the spring equinox.

“I’m completely exhausted. Who’d have thought a party could be so tiring?” Sokka groaned as he collapsed on the nearest couch in the sitting room of their suite.

“That was a lot different than the parties back home.” Katara agreed.

“The food was good.” Suki offered.

“I didn’t recognize most of it, but yeah, it was.” Sokka agreed.

“They had plenty of vegetarian dishes, and egg custard, my favorite. It was almost as good as the monks used to make.” Aang said cheerfully.

“So, your monks didn’t object to eating eggs?” Harry asked.

“No, why?”

“Just curious. We have vegetarians back home that won’t eat eggs, because they consider it to be the same as eating meat, even if it’s only potential meat. I was just surprised is all.”

“Potential meat?”

“Eggs are embryonic chickens. Leave them alone long enough and they hatch into baby chickens.”

Aang blanched and began looking ill. “I didn’t know that.”

Tom arched an eyebrow and looked at Aang like he’d grown a second head.

“How could you not know?”

“I didn’t know what eggs were… I just thought they were some kind of weird nut or something. I never saw where they came from.”

“I wasn’t actually trying to give you a complex, I hope you realize this.” Harry apologized.

“Baby chickens!” Aang whimpered.

“Well, damn.”

“Nice going, Harry.”

“How was I supposed to know he didn’t know what eggs were?”

“Hey, Aang, stop gibbering, and help me get these things out of my hair.” Toph ordered. “You owe me for making me wear this get up.”

Aang twitched and went to stand near Toph. He studied the elaborate hairdo and ornaments and
rubbed at the back of his head.

“I haven’t the first clue how to undo that.”

Suki laughed and gently pushed Aang out of the way. “Hang on Toph, I’ll get them out.”

“If you sit behind her, I can do yours.” Katara offered.

“I’d appreciate it. It’s starting to give me a headache, truthfully.”

“You know, before coming here, I sorta thought being a king would be kind of cool. I think I’ve changed my mind.” Sokka mused.

“I don’t disagree with you, but why?” Harry wondered.

“He spent most of the banquet sitting by himself on that chair up on that platform thingy, just watching everyone. Even while we were eating, he only got to talk to that advisor guy, and Aang for a little bit. That has got to be the loneliest guy on the face of the planet.”

“He’s not completely lonely…he does have a whole bunch of concubines.” Toph offered.

“Where are they? Sequestered away in their own area?” Tom wondered.

“Probably.”

“Not quite the same thing as having friends or a regular family. I’ve read stories about harems. All the women are bored out of their mind most of the time, and so they spend all their time plotting against one another. Doesn’t sound like a friendly place to be.” Harry offered.

“That should do it.”

“Ah, thanks. That’s a relief. I don’t know how the women here walk around like that all the time.” Suki sighed.

“I suppose you get used to it. It does look nice.” Katara agreed.

“There, Toph, that’s the last of it.”

“Thank you, fan girl!” Toph cheered, while running her fingers through her hair to smooth it down.

“You have a lot of hair. You’d never know it usually.” Tom commented idly.

“She has beautiful hair, I think. It’s so thick and soft. Of course, I love Katara’s hair too. I keep mine short because it gets in the way otherwise.” Suki explained rather wistfully.

“It suits you.” Tom offered, which gained him a grateful grin.

“Want me to braid your hair again, Toph?”

“Maybe tomorrow. I wanna go wash the gunk off and go to bed.”

The boys all exchanged looks, and one by one began to stand. Toph wanting to go to bed meant they had watchers nearby—probably behind the walls somewhere. They all hoped they’d go away and not watch them getting changed or sleeping—that was just too creepy to contemplate.

“Actually, that sounds like a good idea for all of us. We traveled a long way, and spent most of the
night socializing."

"Yeah, I’m beat."

"Do you think they’ll let us look around the gardens outside tomorrow?"

"I hope Appa’s okay."

"I’m sure he is. We can find out where he’s being kept in the morning and go visit him."

"By the way, where are Momo and Hedwig? Oh, nevermind, they’re in the garden just outside."

Aang answered his own question, before opening the door to let them in.

"Goodnight, ladies. See you in the morning."

"G’night fellas."

The boys all stopped dead when they entered their room. There were little piles on the end of each bed, conspicuously in view.

"They left us pajamas, and more clothes. Do you think they’re trying to tell us something?"

"You are all far too scruffy to be seen in public?" Tom guessed.

"Who cares? Free stuff!" Sokka cheered.

That set the rest of them to laughing, so they undressed and settled in bed. The sheets were soft and cool, the beds were comfortable, the rooms were light and airy, and the staff had been more than generous since their arrival—yet, even with all that, Ba Sing Se was still their least favorite spot that they’d visited. As they fell asleep, one by one, all of them wondered if there were still spies in the walls.

Life in the palace of the Earth King was an exercise in frustration. When morning came, they were brought breakfast in their rooms, and then bombarded with visits from various nobles in the city who seemed to just want to waste their time, so they could name drop later.

Then, they were given a long-winded tour by a very old, officious busy-body through the gardens, and then a tour of the ‘historical collections’ in the palace, and then whisked off for a tour of Ba Sing Se university. They made a point to tell the department of exotic cultures that Professor Zei had found Wan Shi Tong’s library, just in time for it to be taken back to the spirit world, and that he wouldn’t be coming back. Odd people that they were, they all seemed to envy his fate.

The whole day was spent like that—long meandering walks, pointless distractions.

This continued for three days.

All of them, in spite of having suspected something of the sort might happen, were just about going out of their minds, especially as the equinox was fast approaching. Just when they’d reached the end of their ropes and were considering desperate measures, a messenger came from the Earth King demanding his guests back.

The functionary who had been sent to be their tour guide through the city—a truly creepy and disturbing woman named Joo Dee—seemed flustered and discombobulated by the interruption and she tried arguing with the messenger that she had instructions to show them the zoo and several other ‘cultural sites’ in the city. The royal guardsman, who seemed as creeped out by Joo Dee as the rest of them were just gave her an unimpressed look for her trouble.
“The Earth King’s orders outweigh any orders you might have been given by anyone else.”

He bowed slightly to Aang and asked them to follow him. They were loaded into a carriage and taken back to the palace, where the guardsman led them to a section of the palace they’d not been in previously—an impressive feat considering all the long walks, and then ushered them into a small garden where the king was seated and playing with a bear; amazingly enough, he seemed to be alone. They had seen numerous guards stationed all along their approach. They figured they must be in the king’s personal wing or something.

It was really kind of sad how excited he was to see all of them. His whole face lit up.

“Ah! Avatar! And guests…” he trailed off uncertainly before rallying “I haven’t seen any of you since the banquet. You said you were coming to visit me…”

“We apologize, your majesty, we kept being sent on tours of the palace.” Aang replied, while scratching the bear beneath the chin.

“Ah, Bosco likes you. Oh, please…I had food sent by. Panko…he’s the guard that brought you here…he said you probably would be hungry. Are you hungry?”

“Yes, we are, your majesty, that was very thoughtful of you.”

A table had been set up filled with covered plates, in the shade of the nearby tree. The bear got his own little table.

“Panko suggested that. He thought you might be frightened. Also, Bosco tends to eat whatever food is in reach.” Kuei confided.

Everyone took their seats and Kuei beamed around at all of them, but seemed rather uncertain of what to do next.

Tom gave Aang a meaningful look, which Aang seemed to get after staring at him blankly for a moment.

“Oh! Your majesty…I should introduce everyone.”

Introductions allowed the initial awkwardness a chance to fade. Kuei seemed utterly fascinated by all of them. They let him talk, answered his questions, and played up their exotic travels, the strange animals they’d met along the way, the earth rumble—and Toph’s subsequent kidnapping by the crown prince of the Fire Nation, which they played off as him wanting a rematch. Sokka told the gripping story of his coming-of-age ritual, steering his father’s ship through rough currents, jutting rocks and icebergs, Suki about her life and training as a Kyoshi warrior. Tom waxed poetic about his time in Wan Shi Tong’s library. Katara told the story of her challenge to Master Pakku and told the thrilling story of their bending battle, and then a little of her time in the healing hut, and then worked in a mention of how they had done a ‘sacred dance ritual’ like the one they were all going to be doing for the equinox while at the North Pole with the help of Princess Yue.

Harry flashed her a smile of thanks, as she’d given them a perfect opening to work things around to the equinox.

“That’s right, we’ll be doing one of those as well! I’ve never danced before. I’m kind of excited.”

“The equinox is tomorrow, your majesty. Maybe we should practice? That way everything goes smoothly and the spirits aren’t offended.” Tom interjected.

“Oh, yes, that would be bad, wouldn’t it? My advisor Long Feng always reminds me that I have to
be very conscientious in such duties, or it will spell disaster for the kingdom and my people.”

“Well, there’s plenty of room out here.” Aang pointed out.

“Yes there is. We can practice right now.” Harry was quick to agree.

“Now? Really? Oh…” Kuei seemed rather excited at the prospect of doing something new. The longer he spent with him, the more tragic a figure the guy seemed. He was naive and trusting, and innocent in so many ways. He didn’t seem like a bad guy, just clueless. Raised as he was, he just didn’t know any better, and yet seemed to be trying to be a good king even so. It was good to see he had allies as well, like the guardsman Panko, though obviously what the guy could do was rather limited, with Long Feng being the ‘most trusted advisor’, and his Dai Li creeping about in the walls and on the roofs.

They headed out into an open spot in the garden, and Harry dug out his green music cube. He was going to set it on the table, but one look at the bear, who was eating everything in sight, even a few things that weren’t food, changed his mind. He put a sticking charm on it and stuck it to his chest instead.

Kuei wasn’t very graceful, and he was a rather awkward dancer, though most of that would be cured by repeated practice. However, what he lacked in grace, he more than made up in enthusiasm. He and Aang had great fun, and kept them practicing for a good hour or more.

The King’s face was flushed and his eyes sparkling by the time they called a halt.

“Why, that was marvelous! I don’t know why we don’t do that all the time. Maybe I should schedule a dance party the next time there’s supposed to be a banquet…”

“Where will we be holding the ritual, if you don’t mind me asking?” Harry asked.

“Hmm? Oh, the throne room. There’s lots of room there. I asked Panko and he thought it was a good place. He said he and the other guards would like to be able to witness it.”

“That’s a good idea. Your loyal guardsmen should be there close by to receive some of the blessings.”

“I told Meifeng about it too. She thought it sounded more fun than most of the rituals I normally have to do. I think she would like to have helped.”

“Meifeng, your majesty?”

“Oh, she’s one of the royal concubines. Some of the rituals I have to do to insure stability in the kingdom, the concubines are allowed to take part in. It means I have to do them in their quarters rather than elsewhere though—the concubines aren’t supposed to mingle with anyone but myself and each other. They have their own area, you know. I’m the only one who can get in there, because the only door is in my rooms. They’re not allowed to leave…and I’m not supposed to go in there very often. Long Feng says it’s unseemly. I don’t know why…they’re always playing games in there, and if I want to play cards, there’s never anyone around to play against, and so I have to play solitaire.”

“If they want to take part, none of us care, right everyone?” Aang chirped.

“I don’t think it’s allowed.”

“Your majesty…the reason they’re not allowed to wander around outside is to keep them from straying or being subjected to inappropriate attentions, correct?” Toph spoke up.
“Yes, that’s what Long Feng says. I’m supposed to protect them from all that.” Kuei agreed.

“Well…we’ll be doing a religious ritual to ensure blessings on the kingdom. The more people who take part, the more powerful it will be.”

“But…they’re not supposed to leave.”

“Surely no one can consider them being in your throne room, with you, surrounded by your loyal guardsmen would present any danger.” Tom added persuasively.

“Well…no, I don’t suppose there’s anything wrong with that…except all of you will be there as well.”

“Children are allowed in the concubines rooms, aren’t they?”

“Well, of course. Where else would they be but with their mothers?”

“We’re all children, your majesty.” Toph pointed out. “If they want to come and take part, I don’t see any reason they can’t. You should probably warn your man Panko what you’re going to do so he can make arrangements to clear the area of anyone that might be unwelcome while the concubines are out of their area though. Have them bring the kids too, any of them old enough to dance. It will be fun. A big, private dance party with your whole family.”

“Yeah…families should be able to do fun things together.” Sokka nodded.

“They don’t know the dance ritual.”

“So we have a short practice and then we all meet in the throne room tomorrow.” Aang suggested.

“I’m not allowed to take anyone into their rooms with me.”

“So bring a couple out here, and they can teach the rest.”

Kuei dithered for a bit, but then crept off with a mischievous look on his face. He seemed to get a real kick out of doing something so ‘forbidden’. When he returned, he had four women of various ages with him. Two looked to be the same age as him, about thirty or so, one looked to be in her mid-twenties, and the last was probably in her late teens. Three of the women looked like pretty typical girls of Ba Sing Se, the last, who they were told was Meifeng, the girl he’d mentioned earlier, had pale skin, long black hair and wide grey eyes. She was also an airbender. How one had ended up being the Earth King’s favorite concubine, he didn’t know—but after meeting Longshot, and seeing the two not-sandbenders, he knew the feel of them enough to know an untrained or barely trained airbender when he met one. For being a dead people, he was sure stumbling across a lot of them.

Tom, Harry and Sokka moved off to the side of the garden to watch, and left the girls, Aang and Kuei to teach them the dance. They all felt rather silly—they were hardly going to leer at the concubines or try pouncing on them, after all—but it seemed best to maintain some illusion of respectful propriety.

Watching the girls dance just reinforced his certainty that Meifeng was an airbender—all of them were graceful, but Meifeng, much like Aang seemed ready to drift off on a stray breeze given half a chance. He noticed Aang kept glancing at her, and Toph seemed to be monitoring her as well.
Once the ladies had learned the whole dance to everyone’s satisfaction, Kuei escorted them back to their quarters, to spread the word and teach the others.

When Kuei returned, Harry knew Toph and Aang had definitely figured out the deal with Meifeng.

“Do you have any children with Meifeng?”

“Yes, why?”

“Just curious. Um…do they take after her or after you?”

Kuei blinked and then seemed to have an epiphany. “Ah, yes, she’s quite beautiful, isn’t she? You want to know if I have a daughter your age, don’t you? Well, my daughters with Meifeng are only eight and six. I can have one of the ministers write up a betrothal contract if you like…oh, wait, no. Meifeng made me promise I wouldn’t make any arrangements for the children’s futures or allow anyone else to without consulting her first. Long Feng told me that was silly…but I think my mother would have done the same in her place. Surely that’s not unreasonable, right?”

“No, it’s not unreasonable, and I’m not asking for one of your daughters, I was just curious.”

“Oh, well that’s alright then. I can’t wait till tomorrow, can you? We’re all going to have so much fun!”

“I’m sure it will be a sacred dance ritual that no one will ever forget, your majesty.”

The following morning, the all woke and dressed with a sense of purpose. Harry, Aang, Sokka, Katara and Toph, all of them that had taken part in, or been swept up in the previous quarter dances, could feel the proper moment fast approaching. Everyone dressed in their own clothing—which had by now been cleaned and returned to them—as though girding for war. They were sent breakfast, which they gobbled down nervously. They could feel the moments counting down.

It was with tremendous relief that they greeted guardsman Panko, who came personally to lead them to the throne room. They passed Long Feng and some of the Dai Li along the way, watching them with suspicious, narrowed eyes. He doubted it had taken long for word to reach them that they’d been summoned away from his time-wasting tours to go hang out with the Earth King, alone and mostly unsupervised in his room, though apparently word hadn’t reached them in time to get watchers in place, for whatever reason.

According to Toph, there had been no creeps in the walls or lurking underground, and Harry hadn’t felt any on the roof or in the trees. Long Feng was probably going quietly crazy trying to figure out what they were up to, and how they had gotten Kuei to rebel so completely—he had invited them, apparently without Long Feng ever knowing about it, then he started countermanding his orders when they were kept away from him, and now, he was allowing the royal concubines and his children out of the little prison they were sequestered in, also against Long Feng’s wishes.

Guardsman Panko and Long Feng exchanged a look that could have melted steel as they passed each other. Aang, being Aang, smiled cheerfully at Long Feng and the Dai Li and waved to them like they were old friends.

You could almost hear the man’s teeth grinding from here.

Things really couldn’t have worked out more perfectly. Long Feng probably wasn’t going to try busting into the middle of things, because he wouldn’t want to make Kuei suspicious about why he
was so intent on keeping him away from his guests. He didn’t doubt they were all going to be hiding in the walls though, ready to leap out screaming for their heads and accusing them of a variety of unsavory plots though, if they saw or heard anything they didn’t like.

Too bad for all of them they really were just going to be dancing.

The throne room was empty when they arrived, but for the guards stationed evenly throughout the room. They had seen no one but Long Feng and the Dai Li on their approach. Panko seemed to have taken Kuei at his word and cleared the area all around so the concubines wouldn’t be ‘mingling’.

Kuei finally arrived, carried on his sedan chair, with a line of sixteen women and nine children ranging in age from about twelve to five following in a double row behind him. There was only one boy among them, he looked to be about five—the youngest of the children there. He was walking between Meifeng and the other concubine they’d met the night before who looked to be of an age with her, Jiao, holding both their hands, and looking around wide-eyed at everything. The two women seemed nervous, and kept subtly eyeing the hallways around them, while keeping a firm grip on the little boy, who looked like Kuei in miniature.

Harry suddenly wondered how many other sons Kuei had had in the past, and what had happened to all of them. Long Feng’s assurance that it was ‘unseemly’ to spend time with the concubines took on a new, sinister tone.

His heart went out to all of them. They were prisoners even more than Kuei was. Who could the women really tell if something unsavory was happening? If any of them suspected Long Feng, they would know full well Kuei thought the man was implicitly trustworthy, and probably knew or suspected that Long Feng was rumored to be the real power in Ba Sing Se.

Kuei was in high spirits, and grinning like a boy. He barely waited for the litter bearers to set him down before he hopped out, and came striding over to where the rest of them waited, brimming with energy.

The moment to begin was fast approaching, and settled like a heavy weight around all of them in the know. They got everyone spread out and into position—Kuei, Aang, Tom and Harry forming the square in the center, with the rest of them forming squares around them. Harry popped out the music cube, set it on the steps leading up to Kuei’s throne, and got into position.

Several of the concubines squeaked or startled when the first strains of music broke over the crowd, and their wonder at the tiny box that made music made the first run through less than perfect.

“Girls, please focus!” Kuei scolded. “We don’t want to offend the spirits!”

The girls blushed and murmured apologies and tried to focus and get into the spirit of things, even though this was without doubt the strangest ritual any of them had ever partaken of—there was usually a lot more solemn chanting involved. The second pass went much smoother.

“One more, your majesty, and then let go.”

“Let go?”

“You’ll understand.”

Third pass through, then Kuei’s eyes widened, and the dance changed.
“This is boring. I thought we were supposed to be having an adventure.” Mai groaned.

“We will, once the drill breaches the walls of Ba Sing Se. You can tell your grandchildren that you helped penetrate the impenetrable city.” Azula said grandly.

“Talk about compensation.” Mai muttered under her breath.

Azula shot her a dirty look, before glancing around in search of Ty Lee. Ty Lee was near the drivers, giggling and doing what she did best—distract men.

“Ty Lee. If you do not allow the men to do their work, we’re going to be stuck in this thing longer than we absolutely must.”

The men bent diligently back over their controls, and Ty Lee wandered back to sit with her friends.

“Sorry. It’s just kind of boring in here.”

“You both lack vision. This drill is a marvel of technological innovation and metal-working prowess. You should be standing here in awe at the sheer might and power of the Fire Nation, and thanking your lucky stars that you’re both here to see the Fire Lord’s will in action. We are finally approaching the outer wall of Ba Sing Se, and I will succeed where my uncle failed and take the city. With the last great stronghold of the earth kingdom fallen to our might, none will be able to stop my father’s hold on the entire world.”

“We’re making our final approach, princess.”

“Excellent. Ready the drill!”

Mai and Ty Lee winced as loud mechanical squeaks and groans filled the air, and then an annoying high-pitched whine sounded through the metal, and the room began to vibrate. Azula sat, back straight, her eyes focused on some point only she could see.

The vibrations became more pronounced and the high-pitched whine of the drill deepened as it took its first bite out of Ba Sing Se.

“Are we…bouncing?” Mai asked suddenly as the shaking seemed to increase.

“Probably just puny earthbenders trying to foil us.” Azula laughed.

“Uh…princess? We’ve just lost the tanks. They’ve all flipped over…and their treads seem to have been cut off.”

“Details. They can join us on foot once we’ve deflowered the city.” Azula laughed again, her eyes aglitter with triumph.

Suddenly the world turned upside down. All was a confusion of freefall, and painful impacts, one after the other. There was no up or down.

“What’s going on? What’s happening?” Ty Lee wailed. Azula wanted to answer, but she didn’t know what was happening either, and the men steering the drill were in the same situation they were. Everyone in the room landed together in a painful heap. Azula hit her head seconds before Mai’s bony elbow impacted her stomach, and Ty Lee landed sprawled across her legs. The world went black.
King Bumi cackled and flexed. Several guards rushed in, upon hearing his metal prison shatter, and then were sent flying out of the room, through the walls, and then bounced down the mountain. King Bumi danced, and a few miles away, in the mountain range surrounding Omashu, all his people danced with him and added their strength to his.

The metal sheath that had been added to the wall around the city was popped off, and landed with a tremendous clatter and boom down in the valley below. The massive statue of Fire Lord Ozai that was being built on the mountain’s peak popped off like a champagne cork under pressure, and landed head down, embedded in the next mountain over. The Fire Nation governor, and his wife and son, fled screaming as their newly built palace collapsed behind them. The soldiers, all that were left in the city, found themselves herded into groups and pinned into place by moving tubes of stone, like they’d all been captured in crazy tea cups and propelled—out of the city, down the road, where they were flung to the ground. Princess Azula’s retinue found themselves in the same straights.

King Bumi danced, and all signs of Fire Nation’s short-lived occupation disappeared—torn down, cast out, flung out onto the fleeing soldiers and governor. The great stone wall sealed itself behind them, and Bumi capered across the top of it, still laughing in delight.

“I am Bumi! King of Omashu! The most powerful earthbender you will ever meet, and this is my city! You are not welcome here, except as friendly guests, who remember their manners and their place! Should you return here otherwise, well, there’s more where that came from!”

All across the earth kingdom, small villages danced, and with the aid of their returned earthbenders, shoved away the soldiers and governors of Fire Nation—sometimes all the way to the edge of the coast, where the earth would suddenly rise up and toss them into the sea.

Earth King Kuei was far from these places, as were the nobles who were technically in charge of them—many had never set foot on the lands they ruled in the Earth King’s name, preferring to live lives of luxury and ease in faraway Ba Sing Se. In each of these villages there was someone—a man, or a woman—who had risen as a leader of sorts in times of trouble, who the people looked to and depended on to look out for them.

They danced, and a hundred new kings and queens—protectors of small cities and villages who had no one else to look to—were made. They danced, and they understood; so long as they worked in the people’s best interest, and remembered they were meant to be protectors and not overlords, in times of crises, they could call on the strength of their fellow villagers to help protect them.

The faraway nobles who had forsaken their duties to live in the city were given a choice—accept the charge of protecting and looking after the interests of some small part of the city and the people in it, to better help the Earth King rule fairly and with justice, or to decline and be left to scurry off to scrape out a living elsewhere.

All eagerly accepted the charge—fear of their cushy lives disappearing ensured that.

In the very center of the great city, King Kuei danced with the avatar, and for a moment, touched the great seething mass of humanity that was in his keeping, and felt the city itself like a living thing all around him. He knew of all the farmers dancing in the vast reaches between the outer wall and lower ring, blessing the fields and awakening them to blossom and bear fruit come the time of the harvest.

He could feel the refugees, whose hearts and homes lay elsewhere, but who had fled to his city
seeking shelter and safety. He could feel his people, and for just a moment, understood them and loved them and shared their small hopes and dreams.

The army and the royal guard, who had always been loyal to the king, and the idea of the king, felt it too, and renewed their loyalty to king and city.

The Dai Li were given a choice to continue as they were, or to reaffirm their place and their role in the city as it should be.

While each had held their loyalty to Long Feng, and believed in what they were doing—order needed to be maintained, after all—whatever doubts any of them had held about their ways and their methods were brought forth and exposed.

They felt the city around them, and they were humbled and awed. They had traveled the path they walked because they loved their city. Deep down inside, they wanted to protect it, and have a leader and a task worthy of them.

Long Feng, who in spite of usurping the king’s power, had always, deep down inside, believed in the divine right of kings.

Being confronted so suddenly and so viscerally by something that seemed to confirm all his deep down worries and doubts... His heart exploded while the dance went on—his murder of six royal princes over the years since Kuei’s ascension, and his fear of what it might mean for him should Kuei use his king powers to realize what he had done undid him. He clutched his chest, and died in the wall outside the throne room, where he had been spying and ready to intervene to insure his own primacy.

For one shining moment, the city of Ba Sing Se moved as one—and all, from the lowest peasant to the king felt the approach of the drill, a menacing intruder who wished to destroy their city and their way of life.

King Kuei moved, and his people moved with him.
The drill never really stood a chance.

The soldiers on the wall watched the drill lift up.

It was a massive, thick tube of metal, hundreds of feet long, with a drill bit on the front and a thick stream of whitish-grey stone slurry shooting out of the end. The drill was already embedded in the wall when the city struck back. The back end lifted off the ground, showering the soldiers, the wall, and the surrounding land in slurry paste, and then was flung, end over end some distance from the city, and clamped in place upside down in a series of stone vices.

As the magic drained away, the men on the walls cheered.

“All these years, we’ve all been thinking of our city as a coy maiden, who wouldn’t let anyone at her goods...I think it's clear now, our city is a mighty warrior, with a great big coc…”

“STOP!” the other men all begged.

“What?”

“It’s the kind of imagery...you saw it, we all saw it. We know what we saw.” The captain growled.
“But you, me and all the rest of us are standing here, covered in slurry. I really don’t want to think what that means in terms of imagery, got it? We will NEVER speak of this AGAIN.”

“Yes sir!” the men all agreed fervently.

“What the hell is going on!” Zuko demanded.

They had left the eastern Earth Kingdom after spotting several water tribe ships in the area, and headed back to calmer waters on the other side of the continent by continuing up the river and then across past Pohai stronghold and back down the coast again.

A weird energy had filled the air, the same as they had felt months before while at the Eastern Air Temple on the night of the solstice. There was a sudden surge and the men watched in disbelief as a contingent of their soldiers were flung from the shore, seemingly by the very land itself and into the water. Naturally, they had gone and rescued them. As they continued down the coast, they came across several more—either seeing with their own eyes as they were flung into the sea, or drifting past to find soldiers clinging to rocks just off shore and begging for help. They now had soldiers packed in every available space on the ship, crowded on the deck—and they were still coming across more. He had sent men out on the river trawlers to comb the shores looking for more men—he was afraid they were going to miss someone.

The soldiers were frightened—wide-eyed, shell-shocked and silent, sitting in small huddled masses throughout the ship. They had heard rumors that the spirits of the world were up in arms, looking for their blood, but they had dismissed them as stories—foolish fairytales told by credulous backwards Earth Kingdom peasants. They didn’t hold with such nonsense in Fire Nation—all their own backwater peasants had been drug kicking and screaming into the modern age years ago. Silly little roadside shrines dedicated to superstition had been destroyed, and the credulous peasants herded into schools where they could be properly educated on the realities of the world—spirits were nothing more than fancies: technology, discipline and the might of their great nation were the real powers in the world.

True, there were a few small holdouts who kept small shrines hidden in their houses, figuring it was better to be safe than sorry, and a few old geezers and grannies moaning that the recent Fire Lords were going to lead them to their destruction with their arrogance—but people ignored them, and treated them as the embarrassment they were.

More than one man on the ship was wondering if he owed his granny a heartfelt, groveling apology.

Prince Zuko didn’t realize it, but he won the hearts of a good number of his people that day.

Dressed casually, working alongside his crew to rescue the soldiers, healing some, working long into the night to make sure no one was left behind, and then giving up his room so the terrified noblewoman and her baby that were found on the shores near Omashu could get some sleep. It made a stark contrast to their usual run-ins with nobles, who acted like they were too good to walk on the same ground as the rest of them. None could imagine any of them acting similarly—many, they were certain, would have simply passed by and left them to drown if they thought it might inconvenience them.

Zuko wasn’t aware of any of that, or of the story of his Agni Kai and his banishment being passed in whispers—he was too busy making sure they helped their people.

Zuko had them leave him on the shore of the Earth Kingdom, taking the last of the mongoose
dragons with him the following day. There had been much protest—the land there would chew him up and swallow him! Zuko was adamant.

“But where are you going, Prince Zuko?”

“I can’t enter Fire Nation without breaking my banishment, and there are few if any other ships around to transport everyone. You and the crew can see everyone safely back home.”

“It’s too dangerous! You saw what the land did to all our soldiers!”

“I’m banished, remember? I’m not part of the war, and unless I can reverse my banishment, I’m not technically part of the Fire Nation. I’ll be fine.”

Iroh stayed on the ship with the others, and watched his nephew grow smaller and smaller as the ship pulled out to sea. He wanted to stay, but his nephew would never forgive him if the men they had rescued came to harm or suffered repercussions for being cast into the sea by the very earth itself. They would need someone with his authority to see to it they weren’t.

“Lieutenant Jee, head towards the colonies, not the homeland. We are vastly overcrowded and riding low in the water. Let us see if anything remains of our conquest of these lands. If anything does, help may be nearer to hand than the other side of the ocean.”

“If not?”

“If not, we have plenty of extra hands to help in any evacuation, and there will hopefully be more boats to help transport everyone, even if they are only small fishing boats and pleasure craft.”

“The world is so big.” Kuei whispered.

“That it is. It’s incredible.” Jiao, who was beside him, agreed.

Kuei had given some orders when the dance wound down. Long Feng’s body was retrieved and taken elsewhere to be dealt with. He couldn’t even look at him at the moment, now that he knew the full extent of his betrayal and his treachery.

He was a fool—probably the greatest fool to ever live. Why, just yesterday he had told the avatar and his companions that the concubines and their children were sequestered away, with the only entrance through his rooms, because he was supposed to protect them from unsavory attention.

Long Feng, his most trusted, had seen to the deaths of six of his children. He had never allowed for more than one boy child to remain at any one time—always the youngest, so they would be pliable and innocent as he himself had been at age four when he had lost his whole family.

Meifeng and Jiao’s sorrow and fear for little Changming had shamed him deeply—two new baby boys had recently been born in the concubines quarters, and all of them were already in mourning for Changming and the elder of the two babies.

Meifeng had seized upon the arrival of the avatar in the hopes of winning safety and justice for them—they all accepted that they could not depend on him, because he was too deep in Long Feng’s pocket. The worst part of all it was that they didn’t blame him for it.

Once Long Feng had been removed, he had ordered the Dai Li to fetch the women and prisoners
from their headquarters and bring them to him. He’d felt them, when he’d felt the rest of the city, like a pit of darkness under Lake Laogai. He didn’t know what all had been done to them, but it was wrong, whatever it was, and it stopped now. Once that was done, he had declared his intention to travel to the outer wall, to see with his own eyes the thing that had attacked while they were dancing.

It was a mark of how much had changed that the guards simply formed up around he and the concubines and the children and led them out of the palace, while servants ran ahead to prepare transport for them.

Apparently, there were fancy palanquins with curtains to transport royal concubines through the streets should they wish to see the city. He had one as well. He’d never known. He’d never had the opportunity to use it before. He’d never once stepped foot outside the palace.

He would never forget the first step outside. From up here, you could see a large part of the city laid out in front of you—mostly just the upper ring and a suggestion of the middle. He, the concubines and the children all stopped a moment there on the steps to look around.

He might have been the greatest fool to ever live up until this moment, but he had a chance now to make things different.

While King Kuei and his group began their journey towards the train station to begin the ride towards the outer wall, numerous twitchy nobles were hurrying to travel to those parts of the city they now knew were theirs to look after. So far as any of them were concerned, the sprits had spoken—loud and clear. They wanted to make sure they knew they were taking their new responsibilities seriously. They had all felt the thing that was attacking the city, felt the size, weight and power of it, and had felt when it was flung away. None of them wanted something similar happening to themselves.

In the lower ring, those who had made a new home and new life for themselves in the city went back to work. Those refugees who still thought of themselves as so-and-so from such-and-such village began packing and gathering supplies to begin the long journey home. They too had heard the spirits’ commands—if it was their land and their home, they had to claim it and fight for it. They had fought for it, now they had to reclaim it and make it theirs once more.

“Holy moly…look at the size of that thing.” Harry said in shock.

After a few hours travel through the city, the king, the concubines, their children, the avatar and his companions had finally alighted on the outer wall to get their first close up view of the thing they’d all helped fling away. The soldiers and royal guardsmen and the Dai Li were similarly shocked, and they all knew, earthbender or not, they had no real hope of repeating such a feat again in their lifetimes—it was the might of the people itself that had flung the invader away.

“We should probably check for survivors.” Aang spoke up quietly. “After what happened here today, it probably won’t be too hard to convince all of them that they really want to go home.”

No one dared object. It hadn’t escaped anyone’s notice that none of them had ever experienced anything like they had today until the avatar had reappeared in the world. None of them wanted to take any chances and disagree, even if many privately thought the Fire Nation bastards should be left to rot.

“My friends and I can take care of that, if you like.”
“Thank you, avatar, that would be appreciated.” Kuei answered faintly.

After everything else that had happened that day, no one batted an eye when one of the avatar’s companions pulled a carpet out of thin air, or the avatar’s staff suddenly sprouted wings, and they all flew away.

“This is, without a doubt, the strangest day of my entire life.”

“I think we all feel that way, your majesty.” Ming, one of the Dai Li agreed wryly.

The king leaned down to see for himself the gouge that had been taken out of the outer wall. He could almost feel it down there, like a missing tooth.

Today’s ritual had brought forth more surprises than the obvious ones: Kuei himself, two of his sons (Mingchang and one of the two babies), three of his daughters and one of his concubines were all earthbenders, though none of them had been trained—until today, that is.

Meifeng, and his two daughters with her, were not. They had the same grey eyes the avatar did. It was a fact that was brought home once more when he saw them, standing a little away from the rest of them, staring out into the sky, and watching the small distant figure of the avatar wheel around through it like a bird, while a cooling breeze that seemed to exist solely for them played around them.

He remembered then that the avatar had specifically asked about her and any children they might have—did they take after him or after her indeed.

Meifeng had always been his favorite—because he’d always been aware on some level that he couldn’t hold onto her. The feeling that she was always within moments of flitting away had made him covet her in a way he never had any of the others.

In his blindness, it seemed he had understood far more than he thought.

He tore his eyes away from the three of them and found he wasn’t the only one who had been watching them. Jiao, his only earthbender concubine, mother of Mingcheng, was as well, with a look of resigned sadness on her face.

When she felt his eyes on her she had simply shrugged.

“She is my best friend, my sister in all but name. She sang to me each night when I couldn’t sleep after my eldest son was taken from me, and vowed she would find a way to save us all. Like you, my king, I’ve always known somewhere in my heart that I couldn’t keep her, though not until today did I truly understand why.”

“Why are we going to the trouble of burying these people again?” Katara muttered.

“Because they’re dead, and we helped kill them, however peripherally.” Harry answered.

“If you need a better reason, the drill hovering overhead, and the mass of graves below makes a very pointed warning, don’t you think?” Tom added.

The drill was huge, and it had housed hundreds of soldiers and engineers. Most of those people were
now dead. The survivors were all people who had been in relatively small spaces when the drill had been flung. The poor bastards that had been in the larger areas, and the areas that were packed tight with people and equipment hadn’t fared so well. Even the lucky ones were pretty banged up—bruised, contused, concussed, and sporting broken bones.

It had taken hours to find the survivors. Toph, Katara and Aang, Sokka and Suki focused on that: Toph could pinpoint where living people were, even if not as easily as she could on land, she could still feel vibrations in the metal. Katara and Aang could heal somewhat with waterbending, Sokka and Suki went with them to help where they could—both knew a tiny bit of rough and ready field medicine, and knew how to splint broken bones if nothing else.

Tom and Harry traveled behind them, gathering up the dead with flicks of their wands, and then opening holes in the drill to punt them through to land outside, while they destroyed and obliterated as much of the machinery as they could along the way. No sense letting anyone else get any bright ideas by studying the thing, if they could manage to get up here.

Aang had insisted on burying the piles of dead soldiers once he’d seen them. He’d been rather reproachful when he saw they’d just been dumped out of the drill in piles.

“We did things the quick and dirty way, and it still took hours to move them all. If we’d been all careful like, we’d be at it for days yet, and the bodies would have started rotting by then.” Tom pointed out. That had silenced anymore protest on Aang’s part.

He and Toph had used earthbending to make several mass graves. The survivors rested nearby, mute and shell shocked by what happened. Seeing so many of their dead being manhandled into graves, and the technological marvel they’d all been so proud of hanging overhead like a gruesome ornament, kept them quiet and subdued.

Princess Azula was still unconscious, or she at least, would be attacking, even if no one else was willing.

When the funeral rites had been concluded, they all turned their attention to the survivors.

“What do we do with these guys?” Sokka wondered. “We can’t just leave them out here…I doubt the folks in the city want them.”

“Why can’t we leave them out here?” Katara wondered. “How many refugees were left with as little as they have now, and in just as dire straits? Let them find their own way home. Maybe it will teach them to stop being evil.”

“Works for me.” Sokka replied.

“We’re all decided then?” Harry asked.

Aang looked undecided, but he nodded as well.

“I’d guess I’d start walking if I were you.” Toph prodded the man nearest her with her toe.

“C-can we at least get some water to see us across the desert? I’m not a soldier, I’m just a guy given a job to help work this thing. I’ve never killed anyone in my life!”

“Sure, go ahead. Take what you need and then head home.”

The three girls in the back of the group stayed where they were while the rest scurried off to grab what they could carry and run.
Knife girl, and acrobat girl were awake and watching them warily; they both looked like they really wanted to leave as well, but their third, the angry princess, was still unconscious. Difficult as she could be to deal with sometimes, neither of them felt comfortable with just leaving her there at the mercy of the avatar.

“If you can hail a ship to take you back to Fire Nation when you get back to wherever you all brought this thing out of, I would suggest you do that. Omashu has been retaken, as have all of the recent conquests by Fire Nation. The only parts of this continent that are still under Fire Nation control are the very oldest colonies along the northwestern coastline—places that have considered themselves Fire Nation for generations. Everything else between here and there is Earth Kingdom.” Harry told them seriously.

“That’s ridiculous.” Mai protested.

“Suit yourself. You’ll see the truth of my words for yourself should you choose to travel overland.” Mai’s face remained expressionless, but Toph turned to face her—or at least her general direction.

“Your family is still alive. King Bumi just kicked everyone out. By himself. It was awesome.”

“Still think you can take him?” Aang wondered curiously.

“Don’t know, but I’d sure as heck like to try. I’m pretty awesome myself you know.”

“Is that Appa?” Katara pointed at the white dot in the sky that was swiftly closing in on them.

“Appa! Down here!”

“I wonder why he showed up?” Sokka wondered.

“He, Hedwig and Momo probably just realized we all left the city without them and came to give us hell about it.” Harry realized.

The angry shriek of an owl sounded overhead and Harry winced.

“Yep. That’s just what happened.”

Mai and Ty Lee could only watch with disbelief as the fearsome avatar, and one of the dangerous spirits who had rendered them all helpless were left running in fear of a scolding by their pets, while the rest of their ragtag band laughed at them. Nothing in the world made sense anymore.
The path of destiny

Chapter Summary

The gaang deal with the aftermath of the spring equinox, Zuko makes a choice.

“Things sure can change quickly sometimes.” Tom noted.

“Understatement.” Harry chuckled.

They were currently enjoying a pleasant afternoon in one of the many little pavilions that dotted the courtyard garden in the palace. Across the way, they could see Aang teaching Meifeng and her two daughters—Liqui and Qing—a few tricks with airbending. The whole palace staff had known about them once the dance was done, and in their usual efficient way had unobtrusively acknowledged the new information—they’d given she and the girls the same color scheme they’d given Tom and Harry—Earth Kingdom colors with an air nomad twist.

The Dai Li were going to be travelling to the various air temples, to use their mad earthbending skills to restore the places to their former grandeur. It was to be a penance, of sorts, for what they and Long Feng had allowed the city to become. It was also Kuei’s way of ensuring Meifang and his daughters had safe places to live in when eventually headed out to learn to use their airbending, and an apology for having let them all down so badly.

Kuei had come a long way from the guy they’d met just a few short days ago.

Elsewhere in the garden, Kuei, his son, daughters and one concubine who were all earth benders were, along with Toph, practicing their newly discovered earthbending. They were blindfolded and barefoot and trying to sense the earth the way she did. They seemed to be having fun.

The rest of the concubines were wandering the garden, enjoying their second day of freedom from being constant prisoners in the seraglio. The remaining little girls, the non-benders, were gathered in an adoring knot around Suki and Katara.

They had a feeling Kuei was going to have his hands full in a couple of years—the way it looked now, he was going to have a whole cadre of warrior-minded daughters ready to take Ba Sing Se, and possibly the rest of the world, by storm.

Sokka, Harry and Tom were hanging out in one of the little pavilions in the middle, watching it all, and enjoying the snacks and drinks left by the servants earlier.

At the moment, life was good.

“Ugh…”

“Azula!”

“pain.”
“Sorry. I’ll talk quieter. Gosh I’m happy to hear your voice. We were beginning to wonder if you were ever going to wake up.” Ty Lee whispered, sounding relieved.

Azula’s eyes fluttered open weakly, and she found herself lying on the hard ground, staring up at the stars. It was dark, and she was outside. What had happened? The last she remembered…she was in the drill and on her way to conquer Ba Sing Se…

“We failed. Not only was Ba Sing Se not deflowered…Fire Nation was figuratively castrated in the act.” Mai murmured somewhere to her left.

“Impossible.”

“Look over there.”

Azula turned her still throbbing head and saw the menacing bulk of the drill nearby, upside down and pinned into place by a series of huge rock formations that clamped around it like vises. She pushed herself to a sitting position and realized she could see the great wall of Ba Sing Se in the distance, completely undamaged. She listened with half an ear while the two girls recounted what they knew of what happened after, and what the spirits that traveled with the avatar had told them.

“The other survivors left hours ago. They raided the drill for what water and supplies they could carry with them and set off back down the track we made getting here.”

“I see”

She could feel the others trading a glance behind her back. Part of her wanted to snarl at them, but the greater part of her was too numb and shellshocked to muster up even that much energy. For the first time in her life she had absolutely, positively no idea what to do.

If any part of it were true, she couldn’t go home—her father would be foaming at the mouth, fit to be tied…and he might blame her. She had pushed the engineers to get the drill up and running so she could head off a-conquering. Apparently that act had set off a chain reaction that had completely reversed all their victories to date and their stranglehold on the Earth Kingdom.

Normally, she would have just discarded the drill plan as useless and thought of something else if it didn’t work, but seeing that her precious drill was apparently flung several hundred feet away from the wall they’d been in the midst of cutting through, she wasn’t too keen to get any closer to the city. It was terrifying to even imagine that kind of raw power.

She was completely paralyzed with indecision. She didn’t know what to do or where to go next.

Two sets of warm arms wrapped around her, and she realized she was shaking. She was pathetic. So weak. The strong didn’t need such coddling. The thing was, at the moment, she really did need it. Maybe, it could be a sign of strength to be able to admit that.

Her father would disagree. He would sneer at her in disgust and remind her that he needed no such thing.

Her mother…and oh, how it still hurt to think of her all these years later…wouldn’t. She had always been most standoffish at the times when her father was most pleased.

She wondered if her mother would have loved her if she hadn’t worked so hard to make her father
proud.
"Of course, if I hadn’t, I’d probably be dead right now."

She shoved the last treacherous thought away violently. She must have hit her head harder than she thought. She obviously wasn’t thinking clearly.

“Have you gathered any supplies?"

“Yeah, we did. Water mostly. That’s what we’ll need most.”

“We should start walking. The desert will be easier to cross at night. We can try to find shelter of some sort to sleep away the daylight hours."

She needed help to stand, and once she was up, her whole head throbbed in time to her heartbeat. What she wanted, more than anything, was a soft bed, the attentions of a healer, and a good meal. Instead, she took her share of the water containers Mai and Ty Lee had gathered and put into ugly cobbled-together carrying harnesses while she was unconscious, and started walking.

The gang had stayed for two more weeks at the palace after the equinox.

Katara had spent some time with the victims of Long Feng’s brainwashing program under the Dai Li, trying to fix what was done to them. There were apparently hundreds of Joo Dees beyond their creepy tour guide. They were women the Dai Li had snatched up, brainwashed and sent out to help reinforce their control over the city by finding and reporting anyone who dared contradict the official line—there was no war, everything was great—and frightening others into obedience through their sheer creep factor.

Given the sorts of things they now knew the man was responsible for, none of them could honestly say they were at all sorry Long Feng was dead. Whatever his original intentions might have been, he was a perfect case of ‘for the greater good’ gone bad.

While she had been doing that, Aang had transported Dai Li to the Western and Southern Air Temples to get started on their clean-up efforts. While he was doing that, those heading off to the Eastern and Northern temples had hopped ships as neither was that far from where they currently were, and were easily reached by water.

They had now left Ba Sing Se themselves. Their only plan at the moment was to spend a bit of time flying over Chameleon Bay to see if the Water Tribe guys were willing to get back in the ‘transporting refugees’ business. A pretty portion of the lower ring had started packing and putting their affairs in the city in order after the equinox. It was going to be a really long walk for some of them without help.

Once that was done, they were going to take a leisurely tour over the continent to see if there were any spots where the Fire Nation had rallied and tried to retake the places they’d been conquering in recent years. If there were any such places, they were going to either try driving them off themselves, or sending word to the Earth Kingdom army of where the hotspots were to let them deal with it.

Suki would be rejoining her warriors to help lead their people back to their island home and rebuild. Sokka wasn’t real thrilled about the last part.
When they concluded their tour, they would be heading to the Western Air Temple to regroup while Aang took the Dai Li that were there, and at the Southern temple, back home. He had given all of them a choice of which one to go to—east or west—and they had chosen the western one because Aang told them it was ‘really wacky’ and different from all the others.

“There! It’s dad and the others.”

Aang corrected their course to intercept the water tribe ships.

“Full moon bay isn’t too far from here. Looks like I’ll be leaving all of you soon.”

“It won’t be forever. We’ll see each other again.” Sokka said firmly.

Suki grinned and bumped him with her shoulder.

“Promise?”

“Definitely.”

One of the ships had changed course and was heading for shore. The rest of the flotilla stayed where they were, and continued their patrols. They passed Hakoda’s ship and headed for the beach.

Hakoda and the others on his ship were rather amazed by their stories of their stay in Ba Sing Se. He agreed to rotate one or two of the ships to make short trips to help out some of the refugees, but that was all. There was still the possibility of Fire Nation ships in the area, and they didn’t want to let them start to retake parts of the Earth Kingdom when no one was looking.

It was all very well and good to kick them out of parts of Earth Kingdom; the war wasn’t actually over until Fire Nation agreed.

“Still, it’s most of the way there. At the rate things are going, it shouldn’t be too much longer. Hey… maybe we can find Jet while we’re touring. He and the Freedom Fighters probably don’t have much to do these days.”

Aang flinched just a bit, before turning a wide-eyed look on Katara.

“Bad idea.” Harry and Sokka said together.


“Katara’s boyfriend.” Sokka replied. “And I’m not playing chaperone again. I need my sleep!”

“Katara’s boyfriend who hates Fire Nation—not as in, ‘urgh, I want these guys to go away’ but as in ‘GRRR–ARRGH MUST DESTROY!’” Toph added.

“And what’s wrong with that?” Katara asked dangerously.

“In case you’ve forgotten, Aang’s next step is to learn firebending. That means someone from Fire Nation. That plus Jet equals major bad. It won’t matter if Zuko has never been part of the war, or that he stopped his own people from burning down Suki’s village, or that he gave candy to refugee children, or nearly drowned trying to save what he thought was Toph. Jet will attack on sight and keep attacking till one of them is dead.” Harry reminded her.
“That’s not true! If he attacks whoever Aang’s firebending teacher is—and it won’t be Zuko; he’s a no-good dirty bastard who’s evil through and through, though for some reason you’re too blind to see it—the only reason he would do that is because they deserve it!”

“Uh, Katara? Have you completely forgotten that his plan was to blow up the reservoir and drown a whole village? Sokka demanded. “There were a few soldiers there, yeah—all the rest were women, children and old folks, half of which were Earth Kingdom, and all of whom were civilians to boot. He thought it was fine, because killing Fire Nation is all that matters.”

“Jet’s not like that! He’s good and a hero!”

“Katara…he is like that.” Hakoda interjected quietly.

“DAD!”

“He was on my ship for a week. I spent a lot of time getting a feel for the sort of person he was. I’m your father. I already knew he could never be good enough for you—but I needed to see if he was passably acceptable. That’s what fathers do.” Hakoda sighed then, and looked regretful. “There’s a reason we don’t let the boys of the tribe go to war until they’re old enough. The reason is so we don’t get men like Jet. He was just a child when his village and his people were overrun, and he’s been at war every day since then. He’s full of hate, and it eats him up inside day and night. He can’t rest or be even somewhat content unless he’s destroying Fire Nation. I don’t think he’s an evil boy, Katara, don’t get me wrong, but he’s twisted inside. As it stands, if you wanted him to be part of our tribe right now, I would have no choice but to say no. Until he’s able to lay his demons to rest, he would eventually start to destroy everything and everyone around him because he knows no other way to be.”

“You’re wrong! I’ll fix him!”

“This isn’t something you can just fix by waving your arms around, little one, and he needs to want to be fixed in the first place. Right now, he really doesn’t.” Hakoda told her gently.

Katara’s face twisted up into a mulish pout. They all stifled a sigh at the sight—it was Katara at her most stubborn. When she got that face, she’d already decided you were wrong, it didn’t matter what you had to say. Hakoda obviously recognized the look well. His voice got harder.

“He’s not with the earth army last I heard, though his little band of fighters still are. He took off on his own, because he couldn’t stand taking orders, and was being disruptive, and wouldn’t quell his behavior. He accused the others of being traitors when they tried to bring him in line. He was restless, and didn’t think they were destroying the occupation forces quickly enough, so he took off to become a lone vigilante. If he doesn’t purge the hatred soon, I’ve no doubt there’s going to be a string of dead civilians in the Fire Nation colonies before too long, if that’s all he can find to vent his rage on.”

“You’re wrong.” Katara repeated. In truth, she didn’t look too bothered by the idea of her boyfriend becoming a serial killer, so long as he stuck to Fire Nation.

“Have it your way, but my answer still stands.” Hakoda said in his ‘chief voice’.

Katara glowered at all of them, and then flounced off to the far end of the beach, where she stood with her back to all of them.

“Maybe that Haru guy is still around…” Sokka suggested.

“Another boyfriend? What happened to him? Did he run off to be a lone vigilante too?” Suki
wondered.

“Nah. We only knew him for a short time, really. His father was being held captive on a Fire Nation prison barge. We left shortly after we met him to help out with the siege of the North Pole. I haven’t the foggiest where he is now, or what he’s doing.” Toph explained.

Harry peeked at Aang, half expecting him to be hopeful and googly eyed again now that the playing field seemed to be emptying. He wasn’t though, he was staring at Katara’s back looking pensive and sad. He had flinched when she suggested finding Jet, and looked at her like she’d sprouted a second head. Something must have happened that he was unaware of that had given him hope again.

Hakoda and his crew got back underway, and the rest of them continued on to Full Moon Bay.

Suki and Sokka snuggled up together in the back of Appa’s saddle, rubbing noses and cooing. They were obviously getting in their lovey-dovey time before they parted ways again.

Harry glanced around at everyone.

Tight quarters, like there was in Appa’s saddle made it really hard to talk about people behind their back, which was really annoying.

He was such a terrible gossip.

He cast a discreet muffliato and moved a bit closer to Toph.

“Did something happen between Aang and Katara?”

“Uh…”

“We’ll just sound like buzzing in their ears. So?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know what it felt like to you, but Aang looked really shocked when Katara started gushing about finding Jet. He was making a concerted effort before to remember that she was off the market, and trying to keep his mind off things. The way he reacted, he obviously thought things had changed. If he thought that, she did something to make him think it.”

“I don’t really know if anything in particular happened. All I know is, Twinkletoe’s heart has started speeding up again whenever she appears.”

“Is she playing him? Because, I have to say it’s cruel to mess with someone like that.”

“I’m pretty sure she’s just making sure he stays put as an option, and seems to have worked up an appetite. You notice she didn’t go looking to Aang to scratch her itch.” She snorted. “She’s got guts… the fact that she seems to think she can keep Twinkles hanging on as a last chance option, and still get her lovin’ from Jet right in front of him…”

“She either thinks really highly of herself, or really poorly of Aang.” Harry concluded. “Maybe I should spray her with cold water the next time she acts up.”

“I don’t think you’re going to need to. She miscalculated how strong a hold she has on him. He’s the jealous sort, and he has a temper, he just usually sucks it in because of his monkly ‘I love everything, peace blah, blah, blah training.’”

“Great. More snarly Aang, more flouncing wounded Katara. Lovely.”
Beside him, Toph sighed, equally despondent. “Tell me about it.”

They both glanced over when Tom suddenly scooched up beside them, and cast his own discreet anti-eavesdropping spell.

“What are you two talking about? I can’t stand it anymore.”

“We’re gossiping about Katara and Aang.”

“Ah, you caught them kissing behind a pillar too?”

“KISSING!” Toph and Harry both sputtered.

“I thought she was just sticking her boobs out and doing the husky thing!”

“I figured she was doing the doe eyes and pressing up against him a lot.”

“She’s such a wanton woman!”

“Just how much kissing are we talking here? Like, full body contact and tongues, or little grade school pecking?” Harry demanded.

“Nothing over g-rated. Full contact, no movement, no heavy breathing.” Tom replied dryly, before rolling his eyes. He looked like he really couldn’t believe he was having this conversation.

“No wonder he looked like she kicked him in the gut!” Harry growled indignantly.

Toph suddenly paled.

“You know…if Sparky does end up joining us to be Aang’s firebending teacher…”

“What?”

“She’s probably going to crawl into his bedroll and rape him first chance she gets! Probably while telling him how evil and disgusting he is.”

“She’s hates that guy.” Tom pointed out.

“Puhleese! The lady protests way too much. We fought him a couple of times, and no one got hurt, but the way she rants about him, you’d think he killed babies in front of her and ate them! Crazy blue fire was seriously trying to lay the hurt on, but she just sort of rolls her eyes when she’s mentioned… mention Sparky and she becomes a ranting maniac. Damned sixth arrow!”

“Sixth arrow?” Tom asked curiously. Harry gestured towards Aang behind him.

Tom studied him a moment and blanched. “Seriously?”

They all froze and looked up to find Katara, Suki and Sokka staring at them. Tom and Harry cancelled their spells.

“So…what’cha talking about?”

“Nothing.” Harry, Tom and Toph said together. They all sounded quite calm and unconcerned.

“Didn’t look like nothing.” Katara said suspiciously.

“Oh look! We’re at the ferry port.”
Sokka, Katara and Suki all looked overboard.

“Seriously people…how many times to I have to remind you I’m blind?”

“We are at the Ferry Port.”

“Damn…I’m good.”

“Zuko?”

“Girls, you’re all alright! What the hell did you do? The whole world went nuts! The land itself was speeding our soldiers off the coast and dumping them into the sea! My crew and I spent all day going up and down the coast and trying to gather them up and take them to safety!”

He told them what he knew from what the different groups of soldiers and Mai’s family had told them of what happened, so far as they knew it, and what little he’d seen on land himself since it happened.

“You mean those spirits were telling the truth?” Mai asked in shock.

“The spirits?”

“The avatar and his group were in Ba Sing Se.” Mai and Ty Lee filled him in on everything they knew, since they had seen him last. Azula mostly stayed quiet throughout. She’d been moody and silent a lot since she’d woken up on the ground outside the wall.

“Az? You’re not ranting and vowing vengeance.” Zuko pointed out.

Azula just stared at him mutely.

“Damn, look at you.” He stepped forward and lifted her chin so he could see better. “You look like you were covered in bruises…they’re mostly faded, so I didn’t realize…” His hands heated though he made no flames and he began circling them around her head. The annoying ringing that had been in her ears for the last couple of days went blessedly silent. He waved his hands over her arms, chest and back a few times and then stepped back, before turning to look over Mai and Ty Lee more closely. He made a few short passes over them as well.

“Since when are you a healer?” Mai wondered.

“It was just something I learned to do one day. It happened while I was still in the temple, after they brought back the survivors from the north pole.”

Azula’s face took on a sullen cast

“It didn’t happen till I cleared most of my chakras.”

“So…are you like all enlightened now?” Ty Lee asked curiously.

“No. I chose to leave before opening the seventh. You have to let go of all your worldly attachments. I decided that wasn’t something I was ready to do.”

He turned his mongoose dragon around, and the girls pulled theirs, which they’d retrieved from the base upon their return, in around him.
“I guess we should get all of you to the colonies, if they’re still standing. We’re all too obviously Fire Nation, so we’ll kind of stick out now that our forces have been routed most places.”

“Filthy, disgusting Earth Kingdom peasants. We should burn them from the face of the world.”

“Feeling better, I see.” Zuko sighed. “Just stop, would you? Of course they did whatever they could to route us. We’re the invaders. We came here, destroyed people’s homes and attacked them. Of course they’re going to fight back. They’ve been fighting back for a hundred years. You’d think someone would have clued in ages ago that we’re not wanted here.”

“Treason!”

“I prefer to think of it as common sense. Why do we want to make the whole world Fire Nation anyway? A whole world is too much for one man to oversee. Heck, the avatar is supposed to embody the spirit of the whole world, but no one actually expects him or her to really be able to oversee anything beyond the big stuff. It’s too much. It’s not really Fire Nation either, it doesn’t matter how many metal walls get put up, or how many flame banners. Even the colonies that have been ours for generations aren’t really Fire Nation—they sound similar, they look similar in some respects, they have Fire Nation food and clothing—but it’s not home and it never will be. You can feel the difference when you walk the streets.”

“Hmph. Won’t go on the ship, but you’ll travel to Omashu and you’ll wander around the colonies.”

“Very rarely; no more than a handful of times over the last three years; I mostly stayed on the ship when we pulled into port in a colony area. Every once in a great while I would venture out for an hour or two; it was just enough like home to make me homesick, but so different at the same time that it just made it all worse. I never really liked going there. I preferred the Earth Kingdom ports far from the war. They were obviously foreign, didn’t like us but were still willing to do business without too much fuss. No homesickness, no feeling that everything was just sort of ‘off’. All the green gets to you after a while, but apparently they feel the same about us and our insistence on red. Some of their food is interesting enough, though bland in comparison to ours, though even that can change depending on where you’re at. There were a couple of places that served food spicy enough to make anyone from Fire Nation happy. They love walls, something we can’t really fathom, but they’re earth, not fire. They find it comforting or something. They’re different from us in many ways, but that’s not really such a bad thing. It makes life more interesting. Personally, I think it would be boring if the whole world was Fire nation—there’d never be any surprises around the next corner for one. For another, even if it sported the trappings, it would never actually be Fire Nation, just a fun house reflection of it—boring and strange all at once.”

“We’re trying to improve their puny, insignificant lives.”

“No one appreciates having ‘improvements’ shoved down their throats. Had things been in reverse, and Earth Kingdom stormed our shores to shove Earth Kingdom life and ‘improvements’ down our throat, we’d have fought them tooth and nail, every man, woman, and child. We’d have hated them and despised them and burned with the need to utterly annihilate them. Is it really so strange to think they feel the same way when it’s us doing it to them?”

“You make them sound like they’re people, or of any importance. They’re Earth Kingdom scum, nothing more.”

“They’re people, with lives and families and homes and jobs. Under the trappings they’re not so different from us. While you’ve been away in the palace, isolated from the world and getting your nails done and your hair washed, and pushing little markers around on maps in the war room, I’ve been out here, seeing it all first hand. I’ve seen our men crushed in rocks, and I’ve seen far too many
Earth Kingdom peasants fleeing in fear, half their bodies burned off and clutching their children to them. I’ve seen the villages burned down. I’ve heard stories of dishonorable conduct on behalf of our soldiers—raping women, slaughtering children, torturing civilians and laughing about it. I love our people and our nation, but it cannot be denied that this long war has made monsters of some of them.”

“That’s right. We all know I’m a monster.”

Zuko’s eyebrow raised at his sister’s quiet words. They had been said flatly, without inflection, but he was beginning to realize that she was a complicated girl, and she wouldn’t have said it, even quietly, unless it was important.

“I wasn’t talking about you, Azula, I was talking about soldiers on the front lines. You’re not a monster…though you walk a fine enough line sometimes trying to make father proud of you that you could easily become one. You’re spiteful and mean, you lie when it suits you with a smile on your face, you’re manipulative and competitive and a really sore loser.” She turned to glare at him, but he continued as though he hadn’t noticed.

“You’re careful though. You plan things to get what you want in the most direct manner with the least collateral damage. You wouldn’t just go around slaughtering babies or torturing civilians for the hell of it. Though you’re focused and ruthless when it suits you, you always keep your eye on the goal and don’t let yourself get distracted by pointless demonstrations of cruelty just because you can…not usually. Like I said, you walk a really fine line sometimes, and I worry sometimes that it would be easy for you to start crossing lines that maybe shouldn’t be crossed. You’re not a monster though. I know this, so should you.”

Zuko sat proud but relaxed through his whole recital, and his voice was matter-of-fact as he rattled off his list of her faults, though there were a few backhanded compliments that were almost insults in there as well.

Mai and Ty Lee exchanged a discreet sideways glance, and kept their manner relaxed and gazed idly at the surrounding scenery as though they weren’t listening.

“Mother disagreed.” Azula scoffed.

“Did she actually say that to you, or are you making assumptions?”

“She said it, to my face. No assumptions there.”

“The night she disappeared?” Zuko guessed. Azula didn’t say anything, so he knew he was right. “Let me guess, she said it after she dragged you off to talk?”

Again she didn’t answer, just stared fixedly ahead.

“To be fair, she had just overheard you celebrating my coming demise at the hands of our father. I imagine that’s any parent’s worst nightmare, hearing one of their children glorying in the death of the other. She was wrong though. You were six years old. She shouldn’t have said that to you. You shouldn’t have said what you did either, but you were following our father’s lead, like any child would, and you can hardly be blamed for that.”

He turned to look at her then, though she continued staring straight ahead.

“Mom loved you. I have no doubt in my mind about that whatsoever. On the surface, the both of us are a mixture of both our parents, but inside, I’ve always been like mom, and you’ve always been more like dad. That’s just the way it is. I think mom wanted you to be more like her—you were her
only daughter, after all, but you were dismissive of everything she liked and she often felt she had nothing in common with you. It doesn’t mean she didn’t love you, just that she didn’t always understand you. It’s like what I said about your relationship with her being like mine with dad—without the attempted murder, of course, but it seems like you had your own similar pitfalls. At that moment, she was worried, she was angry, she was upset, and she was afraid, and she took some of that out on you. It happens. I’ve hated you plenty in my lifetime, and I’ve often imagined terrible things happening to you. Under all that, I’ve also always loved you. I’m like mom…so if I say she loved you too, no matter what she might have said that one time, I know what I’m talking about.”

Azula averted her face from the rest of them. He let her be. He had no idea all these years that she was carrying something like that around, and he knew from his own experiences at the temple how hard it was to get all the poison out of your system. He turned back to face the road ahead, and let the subject drop. If she was anything like himself, she would resent being asked to talk about how she was feeling. If she had anything to say, she would say it.

“There’s a shallow cave up ahead that would be a good place to spend the night. It’ll be getting dark in an hour or two, and there’s not really anything else suitable for a good distance past it.” Zuko gestured after they’d traveled in silence for a while.

“A nice dinner and some quiet time to rest will be nice. Being on this thing day after day does get wearing after a while.” Ty Lee chirped, seizing on the changed subject with relief.


“It tastes better when it’s been soaked in sea water for an hour before cooking, but come on, it’s not that bad.”

“It’s meat that looks like flakes of leather and hard, shriveled vegetables. It’s disgusting.”

“It’s what our soldiers live on for months at a time in the field. Our country makes this stuff by the boatload. It keeps well, and allows the men to carry it with them and have a hot meal on the go. There’s only so much you can do to make a tasty meal under those kinds of conditions.”

“Golly…our poor soldiers.” Ty Lee said with empathy.

“The navy guys had it a bit better because they could catch fish if they were desperate enough. Small animals would usually flee the area when our ground forces moved in because of all the fire, so the army didn’t have as many options. Agni knows I’ve done plenty of fishing over the years. I prefer to buy it. Live fish are disgusting. We caught crabs a couple of times too, and octopus…sea snails too, though that was mostly an accident. They’re disgusting too, but they actually taste pretty good if they’re prepared right. The ship’s cook, Tcho, is good at making things edible. There’s a reason uncle hunted him down and wooed him out of retirement to serve on the ship. The guy we had at first would just throw whatever was handy into a pot and boil it until it became a big rubbery, pasty mess. Now that was disgusting. After being stuck eating that for months, believe me, army food tastes like fine dining in comparison.”

They found the cave Zuko had told them about. They could see the remains of his campfire still there. The girls let the mongoose dragons forage a bit while he was gathering wood and a big chunk of bamboo from a nearby wild grove. Azula still wasn’t talking much, but everyone let her be; truthfully Mai and Ty Lee didn’t really know what, if anything, to say to her. In all these years, neither of the siblings had ever even hinted at anything like what they’d overheard. They weren’t sure if either wanted or expected them to address it.

Azula absently lit the gathered wood and then went back to brooding. Her attention was caught
however, when she realized her brother was doing something odd. He already had the little travel pot he’d brought with him filled with the horrid stuff that seemed to pass for food among the soldiers and water for it to soak in. It was completely inedible without prior preparation.

No, what caught her attention was him messing about with the tube of bamboo. He chopped it so he had a hollow tube that was open at one end, and then went digging in his pack again. He drew out some rice, and then happily laid out a big leaf he’d also brought with him.

“We’re in luck. We should eat good tonight. It’s too bad I didn’t think to bring some of the bamboo with me before.”

“Zuzu, what are you babbling about?”

“I think you girls are going to like this. It’s something the guru showed me. You wrap rice in banana leaves and stuff it in bamboo and then cook it over a fire. It makes the rice sort of sweet. It’s actually pretty tasty.”

“It’s no wonder you’re so sympathetic to the stupid peasants—you’re practically one yourself these days.”

“I prefer to think of it as having gained useful skills. The thing about peasants that you don’t seem to appreciate, Azula, is that they do actually have a lot of useful skills. You’ve always been curious about them, but you don’t really seem to see them. They can build a house, grow food, make clothing, find medicinal plants in the wild, cook… Being raised like we were, with everything handed to us left us sheltered, and rather dependent. Most nobles, if their house burned down or the servants left, they’d be completely helpless, because they don’t know how to do anything except be nobles. If a peasant lost everything, they could usually keep themselves alive long enough to eventually rebuild everything.”

“That’s actually true. The first few weeks I was with the circus were actually kind of scary. I never had all the servants you guys did, but I still had a lot of stuff done for me. I suddenly had to do everything myself, and I realized I didn’t really know how to do much. I learned though, and then it was great.” Ty Lee agreed.

“You will never catch me washing clothes. Or dishes. Or cooking.” Mai muttered.

“I’m with you. You two are utterly ridiculous.”

“If the whole world ever implodes, and we all find ourselves homeless and needing to start over, Ty Lee and I will survive and you two will starve to death while wallowing in your own filth.”

“Don’t be silly, Zuzu. If such a thing were to ever come to pass, I’d simply make you do it.”

“HA! That’s that what you think. You’d have to learn to pull your own weight. I’m not your servant.”

Mai had turned up her nose at the rice lying on the ground on a soggy leaf. She contented herself with nibbling a very little bit of the army stew, making faces with each bite. Azula had likewise grimaced and turned away.

“More for us.”

Zuko and Ty Lee had both eaten up the rice with hearty appetites. Mai sighed, looked down at her unappetizing stew and set it aside. Azula finished hers without much enthusiasm, but she was
hungry, and so ate what was available. She rather regretted turning up her nose at the rice. Ty Lee certainly seemed to be enjoying it. They lounged around the fire for a bit, talking about nothing in particular, before one by one settling down to get some sleep.

Azula remained awake. Finally, she couldn’t take anymore and tiptoed out of the cave to avoid waking the others who were all sleeping soundly, if uncomfortably on the hard ground. There was a largish boulder not far from the cave mouth. She climbed up on it and wrapped her arms around her knees to gaze out at the stars.

"Mom loved you"

Try as she might, her brother’s words from earlier kept reverberating around in the depths of her mind. He’d sounded so certain—not just about that, but about the idea that she was a monster. He said no. Her mother had said yes…and yet, he seemed certain that she didn’t really mean it.

“I’m like mom, I know what I’m talking about.”

She had never grieved her mother’s disappearance. Why would she? She had made it obvious that she didn’t care about her. She called her a monster and disappeared and they’d never seen or heard from her again. Good riddance, she’d decided.

Underneath that was a festering wound that had struck deep to the very heart of her and never healed. After all, how very awful must she be if her own mother despised her very existence?

Even skating the edges of such a thought was madness and drowning and the world crumbling to dust beneath you with no way out.

It was easier, far easier to decide she didn’t care about her, didn’t want her, and in no way regretted that she was gone.

"Mom loved you. I have absolutely no doubt about that. I’ve hated you plenty in my life, and often wished that awful things would happen to you…but underneath it all, I’ve always loved you too.”

It was like a claw reached deep inside her and tore away the lid from the seething pit of despair which she’d always known, on some level was there, but which it was easy to push down, down, down and paper over with denial.

It hurt. A lot. She could no more stop the tears that choked her than stop the tide. She pressed her face against her knees and tried not to make too much noise. She didn’t want anyone to see her like this. Lately, the world seemed to be taking great delight in not giving her what she wanted.

“Oh Azula.”

Oh, wonderful, marvelous even. Who should it be but gloomy Mai, who sighed a lot; the least sympathetic person in the whole world, who was even more down on ridiculous emotional displays than she was. How utterly, utterly mortifying. The worst part was, she couldn’t just stop—and she’d look the fool even if she could, because Mai had already seen her.

She crawled up beside her on the rock and sat just close enough she could feel the warmth of her
body nearby, but that was all.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it? The sheer, mind-numbing horror of what parents can do to their kids without even trying. It makes me rather horrified at the idea of ever being a parent myself. There’s a huge part of me that’s terrified that I’m going to turn into my mother, and then turn right around and inflict the same childhood on some poor unsuspecting brat of my own that she inflicted on me. You know it’s bad when random spirits you’ve just been in a battle with tell you that you should smile more.”

The sheer absurdity of the statement surprised a laugh out of her.

What a strange night. Her eyes were so puffy and swollen, she could barely see out of them. Her head was pounding and her throat was scratchy and tight. She felt utterly miserable, and yet she was calm.

They sat there quietly for a while and looked at the stars. Slowly, the headache receded, the scratchiness in her throat subsided, and the swelling in her face went down. Mai asked her no questions, she didn’t try to get her to talk about her feelings. She was just there, and for that, she was surprisingly grateful. It was some time later when she spoke again.

“For what it’s worth, we both know Zuko can’t lie to save his life.”

There was that. It was what had made the whole conversation so insidious. Zuko was an idealist who was concerned about honor, who couldn’t lie to save his life. How on earth had the two of them ended up related?

“So far, so good. I wonder how long it will last?”

They had been flying over large swaths of the Earth Kingdom in recent weeks, stopping in small towns, and some larger ones, taking a look around and listening to the gossip. So far, it seemed the rout of the Fire Nation was both complete and successful. As far as most folks in the Earth Kingdom were concerned, the war was over, they had won—except for those pesky colonies, but they’d been there as long as most folks living. Even in Earth Kingdom, most folks thought of them as Fire Nation territory, however much it irked them.

That was all well and good, but the question of the day was—did Fire Nation know all this?

On the surface, it was a ridiculous question, because really, how could they not? Their navy was decimated but for a relatively small number of ships that hadn’t been involved. Their soldiers had been run off the edge of the continent and into the sea. Their prisoners had been taken, their bases destroyed, and a good portion of their war machines taken from them.

The thing was, you didn’t keep a war going for a hundred years if you were willing to give up that easily.

The smart thing to do would be to just accept defeat gracefully, and start rolling back your armies and getting on with your life—after watching for a bit to see if any retaliatory strikes were headed your way, of course; that would only be good sense.

The thing was, they didn’t know if the Fire Lord was smart, or if he was a megalomaniac with a sense of destiny—the latter could be problematical.

The folks across the nation had celebrated, and now were heading back to their little villages to begin
rebuilding and getting the spring planting underway. They were tired from the long years of war. Most wanted to erase the scars they were able to, and get on with their lives. A resurgence of the war at this point would probably be devastating. Just enough time had passed that people were starting to relax, and beginning to stop looking over their shoulders.

They really hoped the Fire Lord was smart.

“I guess we can just head off to the Western Air Temple with no worries.”

They were currently taking a brief break atop a flat mountain that bordered the area between the end of the larger Earth Kingdom continent, and the peninsula on which the Fire Nation colonies were located. The could see one of them in the distance, not far from where they were in fact. It was a big blob of pink in the midst of the green all around it.

“Someone’s coming.” Toph spoke up.

They quieted down and listened.

“…resort town not far from here. I’ve been there before. Uncle always liked it there. I tried to avoid bringing the ship up this way whenever possible because it was always hard to get him to leave again.”

“Sounds wonderful. I can’t wait to sleep in a real bed again. Real food would be nice too.”

“You should have stopped being such a snob and tried some of the yummy rice Zuko made.”

Katara’s eyes narrowed and she reached for the cork on her waterskin. Sokka gripped her wrist warningly, and refused to let go until she relaxed and subsided.

“I’m not eating rice boiled in a soggy leaf and that’s that.”

“Your loss. Me, I want a bath and a change of clothes.”

“I want all of it and a massage. I’m also desperately in need of a manicure.”

“You and me both. What about you, Zuko? What are you going to do first?” Mai asked curiously.

“I’m not going with you. I’ll escort you to the edge of town, but then I have to leave.”

“Zuzu, you’re being ridiculous. You’re as grimy and smelly as the rest of us…more so, actually.”

“I’m going to be looking for somewhere that I can find out where my ship is. After we spent the night gathering up soldiers out of the sea, I left so they could return everyone to Fire Nation. Uncle went with them so they wouldn’t be killed on sight for desertion.”

The four Fire Nation teens disappeared down the road, making further conversation difficult to hear.

“Well, that is lucky. I had wondered where he’d gotten to.” Harry said cheerfully.

“You cannot be serious.”

“Look, Aang needs a firebending teacher, Zuko is right nearby, and shows up right before we were getting ready to head to the temple.”

“And he’s splitting from crazy blue fire and the others, and no one on his ship knows where he is right now. If he’s concerned about retaliation or anything like that, well, now is really the opportune time to get him.” Toph agreed.
Katara scowled and refused to speak to the rest of them.

The flew high, near the clouds and kept a distance behind the foursome. They saw them split up and the three girls continue towards the resort, while Zuko peeled away and headed away from it. He was rather startled when they dropped down out of the sky and landed in front of him a short time later. The beast he was on seemed to recognize Appa from the desert, because it calmed down pretty quickly after being startled. Zuko wasn’t nearly as relaxed by the sudden meeting. He flipped backwards off the thing and landed in a defensive stance. He seemed confused when none of them attacked, but he didn’t relax his stance any.

Aang bit his lip and stared at Zuko worriedly. Katara bristled and glared at him with venomous hatred. Sokka sighed, crossed his arms and looked resigned. Toph waved in his general direction. Tom kept reading the book he was reading. Harry looked around at the others and realized it was pretty much left to him. Rolling his eyes in exasperation, he hopped down off Appa and approached the jumpy teen.

Zuko’s hands erupted in flames as Harry approached. Harry could hear a scuffle behind him—it sounded like Katara howling indignantly, and some muffled grunts that were most likely Sokka being elbowed in the gut while he tried holding her down.

“Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation, it’s time for you to come with us now. Your destiny is nigh.”

“Um…what?”

“Sorry, I thought it sounded suitably spooky and pretentious and whatnot. It’s time for you to come with us. Aang has mostly mastered earth, and needs to begin his firebending training soon. He can’t do that if he doesn’t have his teacher.”

The flames in Zuko’s hands winked out, he was so shocked.

“W-what! You want me to be…”

“Ah. Haven’t gotten that far in your metamorphosis, have you? I was hoping you’d figure things out yourself before it was time. It would certainly have made things simpler.”

“My metamorphosis?”

“You’ve been changing over these last months. You’ve been questioning yourself and your values and your place in the world, haven’t you? Questioning the war and what it has meant, not only for the world but for your own people?”

Zuko slowly relaxed out of his stance.

“You have also been questioning whether the task you were given by your father is where your true destiny lies or if it lay elsewhere. The moment is upon you now to choose.”

A dozen emotions skated across Zuko’s face, and his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. A look of almost physical pain tightened his eyes for a moment, and then he suddenly sagged as though wearied by some long fought battle.

Harry could hear Aang’s feather-light steps coming up behind him, so he moved aside so he could confront Zuko on his own.
The Fire Nation prince and the Avatar studied each other in silence for a moment. Zuko nodded once.

“I accept. Avatar Aang, I will be your firebending teacher.”

Aang said nothing in response, he simply bowed, student to teacher. Zuko bowed back.
The Western Air Temple

Chapter Summary

The gaang settles in at the Western Air Temple to complete Aang's training, Katara has a meltdown and Tom attempts to play counselor.

“There it is! The western air temple!”

Aang sounded terribly relieved. Harry guessed he was as eager to get away from the pervasive cloud of gloom and nastiness that had been hovering over them the whole trip since Zuko had joined them. The sad part was, Zuko himself hadn't been a problem really. He was obviously ill at ease and uncomfortable being in such close quarters with all of them, when the last time he’d seen them they’d all been fighting on opposite sides. He was also terrified of flying, at least at first. He had forced himself to settle down and relax after Katara had started laughing at him rather nastily because of it and casting aspersions on his courage, fitness and manhood.

“Protests waaay too much.” Toph whispered under her breath. Harry had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

It had made what would otherwise have been a pleasant flight over the ocean, surrounded by blue skies and balmy weather decidedly unpleasant.

“Are the temples…hanging from underneath the cliff?” Sokka exclaimed.

“Yes. I told you it was different from the others.”

“I’ll say. That’s really kinda cool.”

“Yeah. This temple is particularly neat. There’s all kinds of fun places here and lots to see. This is one of the two temples where only nuns lived.”

“The eastern temple was the other?” Tom asked curiously.

“Yeah. That one’s pretty neat too. That’s where Appa was born.”

“It is a beautiful place, even derelict like it is.” Zuko interjected quietly.

“What would you know about an airbender temple?” Katara took the opportunity to snarl. “Well, except the southern air temple of course, where you came to attack us all!”

“WHY WERE YOU AT the eastern temple?” Aang spoke over Katara’s venom desperately, modulating his voice when she fell silent through sheer indignation.

“I was living there for several weeks training with guru Pathik.”

“Guru Pathik?”

“He’s an old guy that lives there. He described himself as a spiritual brother to the airbenders. I spent several weeks meditating with him and clearing my chakras. I left before clearing the last one
“Couldn’t cut it, huh?” Katara smirked.

“I chose to leave without trying as it requires you to give up your earthly attachments. I chose not to complete my training.”

“Wow…I didn’t know anyone was living there. I’m going to have to go see this guy at some point.”

“He’d probably like that. He’s a very wise man. He taught me a lot.”

“I suppose you went there looking for Aang?” Katara said in a sweet voice that fooled no one. She really seemed to be spoiling for a fight.

“No, I went there for spiritual training. It’s a good thing I did too. I discovered I could heal after opening most of my chakras. If I hadn’t of done that a lot fewer men would have survived the north pole than ended up happening.”

“Pity.” Katara said frostily.

Zuko’s temper finally ignited. “That’s a rotten thing to say and I’ve had enough of your attitude. I get it, you’re pissed off. I. Don’t.CARE. Those men were just guys on patrol, who got commandeered by Zhao, and got knocked around like toys by the ocean—something none of them could do a single thing to defend themselves against. They were sick and frostbitten and covered in sores by the time they arrived at the temple and I was able to help them. I’m not sorry about that, and I will not sit here and listen to you say they should have died!”

“Look! We’re here!” Aang called back to them rather desperately.

“WHOOSHOOO!” Harry and Sokka cheered, tears in their eyes. They both had pounding headaches from Katara’s shrieking, and both wanted to get far away before she started up again.

The Western Air Temple was a marvel of engineering, though it was also quite obviously the home of a people who didn’t look at gravity quite the way that other people did. Hanging from beneath a large, deep cliff, the temple consisted of a number of inverted pagodas, walkways along the cliff face that ran beneath giant statues of airbending nuns, and platforms interspersed throughout. There were no guardrails or safety features, and few stairs and no bridges connecting everything. Everything hung in the open, with only open sky and a long, long drop beyond them. You probably needed to fly to even consider traversing the whole thing.

“I guess we’ll be stuck wherever we land, huh?” Sokka guessed.

“No really. The temple continues inside the cliff. If you want to see the other buildings, you can get there, you just either have to take the long way or fly, that’s all.”

Sokka leaned over the saddle and gazed down at the ground, which was far, far below them.

“I’ll have to think about that. Flying around over the water is one thing. I never went all that high, and if I had fallen it wouldn’t have been too big a deal. Flying out over the far distant ground… yeah…I’m gonna have to really think about that one.”

Aang pulled them in to the lowest tier of the largest, center pagoda, which was an open air platform with pillars and a fountain. A series of tall slitted doors led the way deeper into the temple, as did a stone staircase that led off to other parts.
Aang looked around, quite pleased.

“The Dai Li obviously haven’t been slacking off. The place looks great—practically brand new.”

“Dai Li?” Zuko asked curiously.

“They’re an elite group of earthbenders who were charged with protecting the cultural heritage of Ba Sing Se. They were sent out by the Earth King to repair and restore all the Air Temples to their original glory.”

“They did a good job. This place was damaged last time I was here—nothing too major, just a couple of collapsed pillars, that sort of thing.”

“There was rather more damage than that.”

The three Dai Li who had been left to restore the Western Temple appeared on a stone ‘elevator’—a platform bent out of the mountain upon which the three of them were riding down to reach them. They were damned creepy guys, really, but they could certainly make an impressive entrance, and they did look sort of cool in their uniforms.

“Battle damage?” Katara asked.

“Mostly age, neglect and wild growth working its way into the stone.”

“Everything looks great. Thank you.”

“It was our pleasure, avatar. This was a project we all appreciated.” His two companions nodded.

“We were tasked long ago to be protectors of cultural heritage, and yet in practice we haven’t had much chance to actually do that, or to use our earthbending skills for much more than sneaking around and occasionally apprehending dissenters. It was good to have a task like this that forced us to truly use our skills in the way they were originally intended to be.”

“Oh, well, I’m glad you all enjoyed yourselves. Are you all ready to go home or did you want to stick around awhile longer?”

“We would be content to leave in the morning.”

“Alright, that’s what we’ll do then.”

The three Dai Li bowed and started back up the mountain.

“Now, if you will excuse us, we were in the middle of a game of pai sho.”

“The giant board is neat, huh?”

“Indeed. We’re thinking of adding one to the Dai Li headquarters when we return. Possibly an all-day echo chamber as well if we can manage it.”

“I guess we should find rooms and stuff and get settled…unless you want to set up camp in some central spot?” Katara asked.

Aang hesitated and then smiled rather sadly. Thinking about the lost airbenders still hurt, but the pain had lessened with time, and then again when they had found four new airbenders.
“Let’s set up in rooms. It would be a shame to waste all the Dai Li’s hard work.”

“Aren’t you sure Aang? Everyone would understand if you can’t bear to walk the empty, echoing halls that would be filled with airbenders if not for murdering Fire Nation scum.”

Aang stared at her for a long moment and then stepped back out of reach of the gripping hand she laid on his shoulder.

“I don’t appreciate you using the genocide of my entire people to make a petty point in a childish one-upmanship contest.”

Katara’s eyes widened and everyone could see for a moment that she really had no idea what to say, and hadn’t really considered how what she was saying might come across.

“Aang…I. I didn’t mean it that way, really. You know I would never make light of something like that.”

Aang stared at her mutely for a long moment, before stepping back out of reach of the hand she had tried to put on his arm.

“Katara…you need to deal with your grief and your anger. You’re letting it turn you into someone ugly, that none of us really wants to know.”

Aang wasn’t one for confrontations.

They could all see what it cost him to say something like that to Katara, knowing how it would hurt her. He looked fairly miserable as he walked away deeper into the temple, but everyone realized it needed to be said, and all could acknowledge it would probably be most effective coming from him —after all, if the guy who’d hated confrontations was getting in your face about it, you knew things had gotten pretty bad.

Toph hesitated briefly before heading into the temple after Aang. She had been able to feel the moment Aang’s words had struck home, and ouch. The thing was, she kind of agreed with what he said, and though she felt kind of bad, she also wanted Sugarqueen to get her act together and stop being such a brat.

Tom had already wandered off soon after they had landed as he wanted to look around. Zuko followed after Toph, as did Harry.

Sokka hesitated, but in the end just left as well. He’d already been through Katara’s grief fest over their mom a few weeks ago. She had basically told him that he could never understand her pain because he hadn’t loved mom like she did. If he were honest with himself, he was still a little angry with her about that, and he had more than enough of her bitching on the way over here. Later, when he was feeling more charitable, he would talk to her.

Katara watched them all abandon her, one after the other and hunched in on herself while pressing a hand to her mouth to stifle the choked sob that welled up out of her throat.

It just wasn’t fair!
He was Fire Nation.
He was one of the awful people who had killed mom and nearly ruined the whole world…and they were taking his side, against her.
She was their friend, and she was Sokka’s sister…and Aang wouldn’t even be here right now if not for her!
How could all of them betray her like that, for him, after everything he’d done?

Zuko hovered awkwardly at the edge of the crowd as they all headed deeper into the temple.

He was already having second thoughts about the whole venture—and who wouldn’t, with the crazy water tribe girl acting the way she was. What was her problem, anyway? Alright, yeah, he had menaced her village—big deal, all he did was yell and shoot a couple of fireballs. He’d left as soon as he had what he came for, and no one had gotten hurt. Yeah, he had chased them, but hey, he was the one that had come out worse in their exchanges—his ship had gotten blown up, he’d been left tied to a tree for hours, wondering if he’d ever move again…

“Don’t worry about it overmuch…difficult, I know, with her hissing venom at you every other syllable, but you’re really not to blame. For some reason, she seems to have fixated on you as the face of the whole Fire Nation. She’ll get over it, or she won’t—we’ll step in if she continues to get out of line.” Harry offered.

“Step in how?” Sokka asked.

“I’ll pop her off back to your gran-gran if it becomes necessary. She needs to get a grip. I was sympathetic at first, because I realized it was worse since she had repressed it all these years, but now I just want her to deal already.”

“What…what happened to your mother, um, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’ll tell you what, oh angry prince of jerkbenders” Zuko glared at him, and Sokka grinned and internally patted himself on the back for his wit.

“I’ll tell you my story, if you tell me yours. You said Fire Nation took your mom as well.”

Zuko sighed. “It’s kind of a long story, and requires some background to understand.”

“Well then, let’s find a nice comfy place to sit, Harry can make tea, and we can trade stories.”

“I guess that’s fair.”

Sokka wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting to hear when angry jerkbender told his story, but it certainly wasn’t what he got. Harry had been right, the jerk’s dad had been the one to fry his face. He’d had a hard time believing that when Harry had suggested it.

Your dad was your dad. Dads taught you and protected you and chased you through the snow and looked after you. They didn’t do things like fry up your face and nearly blind you and then kick you out of your home and your country when you were thirteen. And why had he done these things? Because jerkbender objected to them sending a bunch of raw recruits on a suicide mission. Not a suicide mission that would mean giving your life so the tribe could live another season or anything noble like that, no.

A suicide mission that would gain an hour or so that they could use to better steal yet another village and destroy yet another family, and do yet another scumbuckety thing.

All that was bad enough…but having your grandpa—your grandpa—order your dad to kill you
when you’re eight, because grandpa thought dad spoke out of turn…

Then, as if that’s not brain implodingly bad enough, your little sister comes by to tell you how dang happy she is that you’re not going to live through the night…

Then, your mom, who is the only sane and normal one in the whole damned family decides to off grandpa and flee into the night to protect you.

How could someone even make it through the day knowing all that? He tried to put his own family into the picture to get some idea of what that must have been like, and he couldn’t do it. Grandpa ever do something like that? Unthinkable! Dad—never! Katara? No, no, and no. Even at her most bratty the worst she’d ever done was yell a lot and chuck a small wave at him when he annoyed her.

No, even at her very worst, she would never, never, never get excited or happy knowing he was about to die. Families didn’t do that—or they weren’t supposed to.

And this is what was leading the Fire Nation, and had been, for most of the last couple of decades. It was no wonder the whole world went to hell and there was badness everywhere! With folks like that leading the rest, it couldn’t have been any way else!

After all that, Katara’s snarling fit about their mom seemed petty at best.

Zuko was so not the guy to be blaming for that, and he’d suffered at the hands of Fire Nation—his own family—far worse than they had.

Mom died, and it was awful, but that’s all it was. She was just dead—like a lot of moms and dads and kids and brothers and sisters and uncles and grandparents were. No one had ordered Katara or he to do the deed, and their dad hadn’t come by to cheer that it was going to happen.

Raiders came to their village looking for the last waterbender in the south pole.

Mom told them it was her.

They killed her and left.

Horrible, but that was all there was.

The worst part was, Zuko didn’t make light of it, or get snippy about his pain being more deep and terrible than anything he could possibly understand, or get irked that Katara was throwing mom in his face and being a whiny brat about the whole thing. All he did was agree that losing a mother was awful, and feeling guilty about it being your fault made it even worse.

That had been a couple of hours ago. He had put it all in the back of his mind to ruminate on later.

Now, he was lying awake in his room, thinking about Katara, and Jet and what his dad had said about being twisted inside.

"If he cannot fight Fire Nation to quell his demons, he’ll eventually start destroying everything and everyone around him because he knows no other way to be."

The war was over, mostly, and things were better, and they’d done a lot of good, and they were at a cool temple with a great view, and Aang was getting ready to start the last phase of his avatar training…and Katara was looking for excuses to keep attacking Fire Nation, even if all they were doing was riding by below, complaining about how dirty, tired, hungry, and stinky they all were.

It made him worry for the future. What good was ending the war in the wider world if they just carried it home with them?

The next morning, Aang left with the Dai Li to go pick up the rest of their brethren at the Southern temple, and then head to Ba Sing Se to return them. He mentioned possibly stopping at the Eastern temple while he was in the area to meet Guru Pathik. He said he’d be back in a few days to begin
firebending training.

The rest of them spread out to explore the temple. It was cool and seemed to just go on for miles. There were gardens interspersed throughout the place, and a room of statues, and a bison obstacle course, and a giant pai sho table, and bunches of rooms—and a huge nursery, that lay empty and silent and brought home all over again the tragedy that had befallen the people who used to live there. There was also an all-day echo chamber, which the Dai Li had mentioned. The walls and floor and ceiling were sloped and arranged in such a way that no matter where you stood, any noise you made bounced and bounced and bounced and echoed over and over back and forth for what seemed like hours afterwards.

They had found Harry in there by following the noise. He really seemed to be having fun with the place. He was singing when they arrived—singing in a language none of them, except for Tom, understood. When asked about it, Harry explained it was an old song from their homeworld.

"It's called 'the song that never ends' It seemed fitting, what with all the echoes. Say, where’s Zuko and Katara anyway?"

“I don’t know. Everyone kinda split up and went their separate ways to explore earlier. This place is huge, they could be anywhere.” Tom replied.

“I’m sure they’ll turn up.” Sokka shrugged.

“You don’t think she pushed him off the temple while no one was looking, do you?” Harry wondered.

“Nah. He wouldn’t be dumb enough to stand anywhere near the edge while she was nearby.” Toph replied.

“Good. I’d hate to have to explain to Aang when he got back that Katara killed his firebending teacher.”

Zuko and Katara didn’t show up for lunch, or for dinner that night.

“Man…what if she did push him and he grabbed onto her and they both fell over? We need to check the ground. Um…hey, did one of you guys move the carpet?” Sokka asked.

“The carpet is gone?”

“Yeah. I left it right here. I went up to the top of the cliff this morning to look around, remember? When I was done, I rolled it up and propped it right here near the pillar in case anyone wanted to make a quick jaunt and didn’t want to go the long way…but it’s gone!”

“And so are Zuko and Katara.”

“How the hell did they end up going anywhere together, and WHY?” Sokka demanded.

Toph snorted and crossed her arms. “Looks like I was right.”

Tom looked at Harry. “You’d best clean that thing thoroughly when they get back, or I’m not riding on it again.”

Harry grimaced. “Don’t worry, I will.”
They didn’t return by dinner the following night either.

“Where could they be? And how could Katara not even let anyone know she was going somewhere?” Sokka wondered. It stung pretty deeply that she would run off like this and not say a word. Letting people know where you were going was a rule that was firmly pounded into everyone’s heads back home. The weather could sometimes be treacherous, and unexpected things could happen very quickly. You were always supposed to let people know where you were and what you were doing—it was just common courtesy, it cut down on unnecessary worrying, and it helped guide search parties should they be felt to be warranted.

Harry was getting pissed as well, but for a different reason.

“She took the carpet and didn’t ask, or give us any idea of when they would be back. We don’t know exactly how long Aang is going to be gone—it takes a while to travel to the southern temple, and then he has to head all the way back to Ba Sing Se afterwards, and he’s going to go see that guru. Who knows how long that will take? While we had the carpet, we had the means to travel if we needed to—all of us, though it would be a tight fit. Now, we’re pretty much trapped here—my broom can only carry one person. It was thoughtless, selfish, and rude.”

“Yeah, Sugarqueen and I are going to have words when she returns.” Toph agreed.

“I’m gonna make a hot tub. Anyone want to join me?”

It was the fifth day since Zuko and Katara had disappeared. They had thoroughly explored the temple and the forest on the cliffside above. Harry had taken a quick flight over the valleys below and explored a bit of the surrounding area and mountains. They’d gotten in some sword practice, tried playing a game of pai sho on the giant board, even though none of them had a very clear idea of how to play, beyond the quick and dirty introduction Master Pakku had given Harry while they were at the North Pole.

The temple was great, but there were only four of them there in the whole complex, so they were running out of ways to keep themselves occupied. Hence, the hot tub.

Harry had chosen a garden that was close by to where they were staying. There was a fountain—a large pool of water with a small waterfall cascading into it. With Toph’s help, they formed a second pool by altering the shape of the fountain basin. Toph lowered the wall between the two pools and let water from the waterfall pool fill it and then raised the wall again. Harry hit the water with several heating charms, and the four of them climbed in. They even had cold fruity drinks in coconut shell cups with little umbrellas to sip while they soaked, a pitcher full of more, and a tray of snacks to munch on.

Sokka didn’t even bat an eye at the oddity—he’d gotten used to Harry and Tom being able to just do weird stuff because they felt like it.

It was this scene that Aang returned to find.

“Um…hi guys.”

“Aang! You’re back! Come on it, the water’s great.”
Aang shrugged, stripped down to his shorts, cleaned up briefly in the waterfall pool and slid in to an empty spot. Tom transfigured him a coconut shell cup and little umbrella, Harry filled it with chilled fruit juice.

“So…this is what you’ve all been doing since I’ve been gone?”

“No, we were exploring and what have you. We just did this today.” Harry hit the water with another charm to get it back to soothingly hot.

“Where’s the others?”

“No idea. They disappeared a couple of days ago, took the carpet, didn’t say a word to anyone. We have no idea where they went, what they’re doing, or when they’re coming back.”

“I see.”

“How was your trip?”

“Nothing too exciting. I took the Dai Li home, then I went to visit the guru. I told him everyone was expecting me back so I could start firebending training. He seemed really pleased that Zuko was going to be my teacher. I told him I’d come see him again once I’d made some progress on that front and train with him.”

“We’ll go with you. I’d like to see the Eastern Temple as well.”

Zuko returned alone the following morning, flying the carpet. He looked very ill at ease on the thing.

“Where’s my sister?”

“She’s sitting on a dock staring out at the ocean not too far from here. She won’t talk and she’s refusing to leave.”

“Where have you two been all this time?”

“I told her I knew who had killed her mother—the people responsible for all the attacks on the Southern Water Tribe, actually: the Southern Raiders. There’s a colony and a base on Whale Tail island. With everything that happened lately, I wasn’t sure any of it would still be there, but she wanted to check, and I went with her. She wanted vengeance, but she wasn’t able to kill the guy like she planned. He was an old man, and he was kind of pathetic. He cried and begged for his life and offered his mother in exchange for hers. She just walked away from him. We got most of the way back here, but then she landed the carpet on a dock on the very edge of the Earth Kingdom continent—it’s the most westerly of the Fire Nation colonies there—like I said, not that far from where we are now. She just sat down and refused to go further and wouldn’t answer me. I wasn’t sure what to do, so I just waited, but she’s still there and she’s still not talking and won’t move, so I came to get one of you.”


He drew his wand and cast a plotting spell, and then vanished with barely a sound.

“He does that a lot quieter than you do.”
“He’s had a lot more practice. Technically, I’m not really supposed to even know how yet. You’re not supposed to even learn until right before you come of age, and that’s still three years away for me.”

“He can’t be more than a year or two older than you.”

“He’s actually almost seventy. Like I said, he’s had a lot more practice.”

Tom reappeared with Katara in tow. She looked shocked and nauseated by her sudden surprise apparition, wobbled, and dropped to the floor in a heap. Harry took the carpet, rolled it up and tucked it away.

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m going back in the hot tub.” Harry announced, standing.

“We have a hot tub?” Zuko asked.

“We do now.”

“I made more fruit juice.” Sokka spoke up.

“Excellent. How’d it go this time?”

“Eh, not so good. I can’t quite muster the flair that guy at the Misty Palms oasis managed.”

“Keep practicing. I’m sure you’ll get better.”

Zuko cast one last look at Katara, who still seemed rather out of sorts, and then followed the others.

Katara tensed slightly at the scuffed footstep behind her, but she didn’t otherwise acknowledge whoever was behind her.

“Quite an impressive sulk. The average two-year old has nothing on you.”

Katara cast an indignant glare over her shoulder at Tom, who was regarding her with amusement, and mockery.

“You had the chance to get your revenge and passed it up, because the guy who killed your mom was too pathetic to kill. The little monk might believe you’ve seen the light and understand that violence and revenge are not the way, but I know better. You’ve been a seething ball of rage and darkness since I met you. I think Harry’s the only other one who realized it, although he’s as softearted as the little monk, and so put a sympathetic spin on it. You were sad and grieving and everyone should be sympathetic and give you space, and let your tantrums roll over them because you didn’t really mean it, you were just in a bad place. Poor, sad little girl. It’s true, of course, but I think I’m the only one who can really see clearly what’s underneath it. You grieve the loss of your mother, it’s true…you’re also furiously angry at her, and you resent her for it. You resent your father and brother as well. That’s the thing that’s really got your knickers in a twist—not your grief, but your anger and resentment.”

“How dare you”

“Be quiet and let me speak, little girl, or I’ll silence you. I think you need to hear this, and so I insist that you do. Don’t get me wrong. I couldn’t actually care less if you vent your grief and heal. I’m simply tired of all the snarling.”
Katara shrunk back slightly and closed her mouth, though her eyes burned with fury and resentment.

“I’ve always found your way of phrasing your complaints to be interesting.” Tom continued as though there’d been no interruption. “It’s never ‘raiders came and menaced my village and murdered my mother. It’s always ‘they took her’. You are upset your mother is dead, but the thing that really sticks in your craw is that you had to become your mother. You were the baby, the daughter of the chief, the last waterbender of your tribe—pretty princess perfect Katara. And yet, instead of being pampered and allowed to be a child, your mom gets killed in your place—which makes you feel guilty—and then you were stuck taking care of everyone else, instead of everyone taking care of you. You could never say that, of course. Pretty princess perfect Katara is a trooper, the heart and soul of her little village, and just brimming over with countless virtues—kind, compassionate, responsible, gentle. blah, blah, blah. So, obviously, that big seething ball of rage, resentment, anger and hatred couldn’t possibly be you. It was obvious, it had to be someone else. You were far too noble and good, not to mention more special than everyone around you. So, you took all the icky, wrapped it in a ball and stuffed it down deep, and never ever acknowledged that any of it was there.”

“Why are you saying these awful things?” she choked.

Tom just shook his head like she was being particularly slow, and continued his story, while circling slowly around her.

“Then, one day, daddy dearest leaves to go off to war. You’re pissed off at him too—angry as hell, in fact, because how dare he leave, when pretty princess perfect Katara wants him there and wants to be taken care of? But… good, noble, kind and compassionate pretty princesses don’t get mad at daddy, do they? So it couldn’t possibly be you. You took all that too, wrapped it in a ball, and stuffed it down deep.”

He came to a stop in front of her and his eyes glittered as he took in her hunched posture and miserable face.

“Two years pass, and you are the noble, blessed martyr saint who can do no wrong. Over this time, you start to become a woman—only barely start, but it’s there. Then, one day, you find a glowy monk in an iceberg, and you are content, because here is your proof that you are all things good and proper and noble, and that all that icky stuff you pushed away couldn’t possibly be you. But then”

His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper

“a Fire Nation ship shows up to steal the little monk…and the menacing soldiers are led by…a teenage boy. There you were, being a perfect, saintly little princess, being everyone’s mommy and repressing all your resentment, and dreaming of a vague something you couldn’t quite name. There were no boys your age around, except for your brother…not until the ship came. So…he came and menaced your village, and stole away the proof of your virtue…. and you were attracted to him.”

Katara flinched and made a vague sound of protest.

“You were scandalized and horrified, naturally. Pretty princess perfect Katara couldn’t possibly find anything attractive about the awful people who did awful things and took away mommy and left you stuck in her place—it couldn’t possibly be you! So, once again, you wrapped it in a ball, and stuffed it down deep, and vowed to never, ever, ever forgive him for his evil—and it must be evil, mustn’t it? Making you feel things like that—it has to be some sort of evil power. It couldn’t possibly, possibly be you.”

Katara just stared at him with a pale face, and wide, horrified eyes.
Tom stared back, and then smirked at her.

“Guess what, kid? It’s all you, every bit of it. You’re pissed off at your mom for dying, and resent the hell out of being made to take care of everyone, even though it also makes you feel kind of smug, how much everyone depends on you. You wanted to be taken care of instead. You’re pissed off at your dad—both simply because he left when you wanted him to stay, and because it added to your responsibilities and your burden. And, the reason you hate the fire kid so much is because all your hormones sat up and took notice when he arrived, you probably had a naughty dream or two to boot—and you can’t forgive him for making you feel that way about the enemy.”

Katara flinched again.

“Newsflash, kid—your hormones don’t give a damn about little things like ‘enemy’, or ‘wrong nation, wrong bloodline, wrong color’. The only thing your hormones care about is gearing you up to propagate the species, so they react whenever an eligible possibility crosses your path. He was the first viable possibility that crossed your path—the only one around for miles, in fact, who likely would have been the only one for the foreseeable future. If the sight of him hit you like a mule kick, that’s why.”

Tom sighed then and fixed her with a stern look that said ‘listen closely or else’.

“Now, do us all a favor. Acknowledge that you’re a petty, pissed off ball of rage, angst and hormones and move on. You’re human, this sort of thing is actually par for the course. You have to learn to deal with it.”

His voice gentled just a bit.

“Suppressing it makes it worse, and you can’t cut it out and fling it away—believe me, I’ve tried, and it doesn’t work. It’s in you, it’s in me, it’s in all of us—that’s just the way we’re built—sinners and saints and everything in between. Pretty perfect princesses only exist in fairytales—and they’re a sappy, uninteresting lot by and large. All they do is sit around tittering and being useless and getting kidnapped every other week. Real people aren’t like that. Real people get angry, get resentful, get inconveniently hormonal, and imagine doing horrible things to people who piss them off. That’s just the way it is. So…do yourself, me and everyone else a favor and get over it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go join everyone in the hot tub and have myself a fruity drink. You’re welcome to join us, but only if you stop sulking. Sulking annoys me…unless I’m the one doing it.”

Just like that, he sauntered off as quickly and as silently as he had approached. Katara stared after him with wide eyes.

After her shock wore off, she was rather surprised to discover she felt better.

The following morning, Aang and Zuko went off by themselves to begin Aang’s firebending training. Zuko asked that they be left alone for the first lessons, as they were about control. “Fire can be dangerous, and it’s easy to lose control of it when you’re first learning. It will save on accidents and hard feelings.”

“So, what should we do now?” Sokka wondered once they’d left.

“Hot tub?” Katara suggested.

“Maybe later. I love the hot tub, but you can only cook yourself so long.”

“Oh.”
“You can still use it. I can heat up the water for you if you like, and Tom’s been working on some runes to put on the basin to keep the water comfortably hot once it’s filled.” Harry offered.

“I don’t really want to just hang out there alone.”

“How about we get in some bending practice—a real free-for-all. I’ll join you afterwards if you want.” Toph offered.

“Sokka?”

“I’m going hunting. There’s plenty of fruit and stuff around for Aang. The rest of us can have an all-meant menu. Sounds good, doesn’t it?”

“If you want to eat just meat, be my guest. I like eating vegetables along with my meat.” Tom objected.

“What are you guys going to be doing?”

“Reading.” Tom answered.

“Weaving.” Harry said at the same time.

“You make thread, and now you’re weaving? One of these days I’m going to look around and discover you’ve turned into a woman, aren’t I?”

Harry shot him a dirty look, as did Katara, who had never particularly enjoyed her brother’s rants about ‘women’s work’.

“I found a room with a bunch of large looms, and they’re similar enough to the one my friends and I found at school that I’m pretty sure I can rig them up to work on their own. I’m curious to see what kind of cloth I’ll get from Appa’s fur.”

“You know…flying bison fur would probably make an ideal medium for flying carpets. I’ll bet it would make them quite easy to charm.”

“Well, if you want, you can experiment with some of the cloth once it’s done. I wonder if you could make a flying suit…that would be kind of cool.”

The remaining three watched them wander off, animatedly discussing whatever they were talking about in their own language; neither seemed to realize they had lapsed into it halfway into their discussion.

“Let’s see if everything works.”

Harry tapped the loom they’d just finished charming up to be automatic. It came to life with a tremendous clatter and the shuttle began flying end to end. Harry grinned with accomplishment and moved to the next loom in the room—there were three altogether, rather large ones—to begin charming it up as well. Tom stayed put to watch the emerging fabric take shape.

“Say Tom?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re good at transfiguration, right?”
“Straight O student.”

“Do you know anything about the animagus transformation?”

“I had always intended to look into doing it later, but I never did get around to it—just as well, really. Dumbledore was my transfiguration teacher, remember. Training to be an animagi while at Hogwarts was out of the question, and I sort of forgot about it later, after making the horcruxes.”

“Really? You wanted to be an animagus? Maybe we can help each other then. I’m a fair hand at transfiguration as well, but I figured it would be best to have someone around to watch over me, in case I got stuck in a way that would preclude me reversing the problem myself.”

“You were thinking of trying it then?”

“Yeah. My godfather said he’d help over the summer, but well, from my perspective it’s been almost two years since he said that and I’m getting impatient.”

“You do know you’re stuck with whatever form you end up with?”

“Yeah. I’m hoping for some kind of bird though.”

“I’m not surprised. I’m hoping for some kind of snake—preferably a fast moving, poisonous one. We do seem to be opposites in everything, don’t we? No real common ground.”

“We could meet each other halfway.”

“What do you mean?” Tom turned away from the loom to regard the other curiously.

“Many snakes climb trees, and birds nest in them.”

“So…you’re saying that, even if we’re very different, we can find some middle ground if we just look for it?”

“Something like that—halfway between heaven and earth.”

“You’re a poet now?”

“Only when the mood strikes me.” Harry grinned, before turning back to the loom in front of him.

Harry could feel Tom’s gaze lingering on him, so he continued with his original train of thought.

“So do you want to do it?”

“We’ll have to brew the animagus revealio potion…”

Harry dug out a vial of brown liquid and held it up.

“Oh, you’ve already taken care of that part. Well then, how about once we’re done here? Unless you’ve something else pressing…”

“Right, because we’re all so terribly busy here.” Harry laughed. “How about the middle garden. It’s pretty and slightly out of the way. We shouldn’t be interrupted there. Why don’t you handle charming up the last loom and we can head out once they’re all working?”

“Sounds like a plan.”
The ‘middle garden’ as they had taken to calling it, was situated in the ‘middle’ of two of the temple buildings, a mid-air staircase that led deeper into the mountainside and an open-air platform. It wasn’t very big, but it was pretty—a small jungle hanging nearly in free-fall on the side of a cliff face. Everything was slightly overgrown, even after they’d tended it a bit, and the whole place was a mass of winding pathways set up so there could be a dozen people spread out in the garden, but you would have the illusion of being alone. In the center was a circular mural embedded in the ground with the air nomad swirl symbol picked out in different colored shards of stone. There were numerous small animals and birds that had made the place their home in the time it had lain abandoned. Hedwig and Momo liked it too, though they usually spent most of their time hanging out with Appa, who didn’t like enclosed places.

If you had no head for heights, it was slightly nerve-wracking getting to the garden from their chosen base, unless you took the long way through the mountain. If you wanted to go by the direct route, it required walking on a pathway just wide enough for a person to stand on facing forward, with no guardrail, and then jumping from the edge to the platform, and from the platform to the garden. Harry wasn’t bothered by heights, and the judicious channeling of chakra to his feet when he walked left him confident he wasn’t going to tumble off at any point. Tom wasn’t willing to risk an accident from repeatedly taking unnecessary chances, or so he explained when he suddenly wrapped an arm around Harry and apparated them both to the garden’s center.

Harry clung to him for a moment after they arrived—apparating yourself was one thing; side-along apparating was the pits no matter who was the one driving. When he was sure he wasn’t going to be sick, he stepped back, and was suddenly a bit embarrassed at the position they’d been in, all pressed together like that. As he stepped back, he realized Tom had kept his arm wrapped around him until he found his feet, which was surprisingly considerate of him.

“He probably just didn’t want me throwing up on him. It’s worth a bit of consideration to keep that from happening.”

“So, I guess we should get comfortable and get started then.” He said out loud. They found an open spot and sat down on the ground across from each other. Harry dug out the vial of potion and uncorked it.

“So, we just have a vision, right? It’s been awhile since I’ve read up on the animagus process.”

“Yeah, we’ll have a vision and encounter an animal or animals along the way. The one we bond with will be our eventual animagus form.”

“Sounds simple enough. Shall we?”

Harry drank down half the potion, making a face while he did so and handed Tom what remained. The stuff worked fast; Tom hadn’t finished drinking when the world around Harry began changing. He closed his eyes:

Towering mountains in the distance, with several small waterfalls cascading down them in several places, which led into ponds in sunny meadows, before becoming rivers that led out to sea. One of the mountains was smoking slightly—a volcano. The whole range was covered in greenery and flowers and trees of all sorts. He started walking towards the nearest mountain and began climbing.
He wandered through the mountains for hours, days or weeks, but he saw no animals of any kind. Finally, he saw a cave opening and climbed towards it. The darkness within it was deep and impenetrable, but he knew he’d found what he sought. He took three steps forward and got swallowed in the darkness. That’s when he saw them—two, large shining eyes. He reached his hand forward…

Harry blinked as the vision ended and huffed in annoyance. “Damn it! I was almost there too!”

“You too? I feel like I spent days searching. I was just about to approach the animal—I never did get to see what it was though. I guess we’ll have to make more potion and try again.”

“I don’t have the ingredients, and I don’t have any more pre-made. It’s okay though. Something similar happened to my godfather. He said you can just imagine the place your vision showed you and keep trying. It took him nearly a week of dreaming about his place every night.”

“I suppose there’s no help for it then; it doesn’t bode well, does it? This is supposed to be the easy part.”

“Yeah. Bummer.” Harry agreed as he fell backwards into the grass and made himself comfy. He grunted a second later when Tom laid his head on his stomach.

“Oi.”

“You seem like you’d be a more comfortable pillow that the ground.”

Harry huffed a bit, but let him stay there. His head wasn’t that heavy.

“Hey, do you want to learn Tai Chi?”

“Tai chi?”

“Yeah. You’re the only one here who doesn’t have any martial arts training whatsoever.”

“I’m not really a punching and kicking sort of guy.”

“It’s a soft art—it focuses more on internal energy than on punching and kicking. It’s all about redirecting your opponent’s energy and using their force against them. It’s a low-impact exercise regime with helpful side benefits. I don’t know what it does for muggles, but for wizards it makes your magic run smoother and makes it easier to manage.”

“Where did you learn it, anyway?”

“In the community center in my old neighborhood with a bunch of old folks. It’s often prescribed for people with joint problems and the like that would make a more active exercise regime problematical.”

Tom grunted and turned his head slightly to glare at him unhappily.

“Is this some sort of round about crack about my age? I told you, everything post horcrux is mostly like a vague, half-remembered dream. For all intents and purposes, I’m only slightly older than you are.”

“Why would I make cracks about your age? Remember, Aang is still way older than you—he’s 112.”

“That’s right—frozen in an iceberg or something?”
“Yep. I don’t know why you’d even think that; I still regularly practice it myself, and I was like 7 or 8 when I learned it.”

Tom twitched slightly when Harry began running his fingers through his hair, and then went boneless under his gentle ministrations.

“So, did you want to?”

“That depends…do you want me to move right now?”

“Comfortable, I take it? We don’t have to move right now if you don’t want to.”

They laid there in silence for a bit, just listening to the sounds of nature around them. It was edging towards twilight, leaving the garden and its inhabitants swathed in shadow. Tom rolled slightly to his side when Harry let out a sigh that sounded particularly melancholy.

“What are you thinking about?”

“How much I like this…just being able to be, you know? I knew I was feeling stifled back home—it’s why I left after all, but I think even I didn’t realize quite how stifled until coming here. It’s going to be hard to return to it after a year of going wherever the wind took me, and doing as I pleased.”

“If everything works out like we’re hoping, you won’t have to—well, Hogwarts, but the rest should be better.”

“I think it’s not going to be so simple as everyone popping up here come summer solstice. I think I, or possibly we, will have to go back to start connecting everyone to the anchors we’ve made. Pulling a whole society across worlds is going to take a lot of power, I’m thinking.”

“It will be hard to get around the world to dance the seasons if you’re stuck at Hogwarts.”

“You know…it might not actually be as hard as you think. There are two things that will be happening soon that will make starting things a lot simpler: the quidditch world cup, and the tri-wizard tournament.”

“Oh?”

“The quidditch world cup will be held in England this summer. Barty Crouch sr. started the arrangements for it before he killed himself, and it was continued after his death—though with some changes. It turns out the property that had been purchased to build the stadium on was actually a muggle camp ground. Happily that snafu was found and caused widespread outrage, enough so that they had to quickly find a new parcel of land in the middle of nowhere, far from any muggles, and the public insisted on it being warded and muggle-repelling wards set up in a half-mile radius around the site so that the large international crowd of witches and wizards would be able to enjoy their wizard celebration without any muggles wandering in the middle of it and ruining it for everyone. Can you even imagine what it would have been like had that not happened? Everyone would have been getting fined, harassed and lectured the whole time, and the muggles who owned the place probably would have had their brains running out their ears by the time it was finished…not to mention, after two weeks of all that happening, the crowd would have been in a surly mood. The post game drunken celebrations probably would have resulted in a riot or something.”

“That’s the sort of situation that would have brought out my former followers in force. It was just that kind of thing that we originally formed up to stop.”
“Your followers. They’re all connected to you, aren’t they?”

“I imagine they still are, it was rather deep magic that bound them all to me.”

“That could be very useful as well, and moving to a new world to get a fresh start would probably be something they’d all happily get behind, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, it would, and most of them have international contacts who are of a similar mindset.”

“Most of their children are part of the Melting Pot. It would take some planning to get everyone positioned to capture a large enough portion of the populace in each place that it would spread…and we’d have to take precautions to not sweep up all the muggles in the area…although…”

“What?”

“The dances are about building communities, but they also bring forth what you put into them to some degree. Up until this point, we’ve always gone into them with the idea to sweep up everyone in the area…we weren’t really considering the muggles at the bottom of the hill at my godfather’s wedding, because always before we danced at Hogwarts and there were no muggles around to get swept up. If everyone goes into it with the idea of magical community only, and binding them all together so we can be pulled across together, that might be enough. It’s a sleight of hand trick—we’ve had it hammered into our heads for so long that the muggles are part of the community, even the ones who want nothing to do with them always have worries about muggles in the back of their minds at all times. We might just have to change the parameters—and the group that starts the dance usually sets them, even if only unconsciously.”

“If you had been by my side a lifetime ago, we would rule the world by now.”

“No we wouldn’t have. I have no interest in ruling the world—too much paperwork, too many sycophants. I would have convinced you to run away with me to have adventures instead.”

The shadows had grown deep enough that he couldn’t really see the other boy anymore, he could only hear his quiet laughter—

“Who knows, you might have succeeded.” Tom agreed when the last of his chuckles subsided.

He had never heard him laugh before, he realized—not truly laugh. He’d heard him snicker or make fake social laughter when he was with a group and being charming, but never just spontaneously laugh like that.

He liked the sound of his honest laughter; he’d have to make sure he did it more often.
Reassessment and Training

Chapter Summary

Aang’s training continues, Harry and Tom consider the future, Zuko learns some upsetting information and the gaang heads to Fire Nation.

Azula was dropped unceremoniously into the center of the room and left there. She slumped in place—her limbs weren’t responding normally yet—and then flinched when the door shut behind her with a clang that sounded scarily final.

She didn’t know where Mai and Ty Lee were—or if they were even still alive. Her vision began graying out at the edges even thinking that, but she had to be realistic here. The only reason she was still alive is because someone else took the blow meant for her….

She began shaking then, as the scene replayed itself again and again in her mind.

She had just frozen, like a bird-mouse in a cobra-weasel’s sights. She hadn’t been able to think or move or react because what was happening simply could not be happening. It couldn’t be real—and yet it was—and she had just frozen.

He had lied to her.
It wasn’t supposed to work like that.

She had worked so hard, for so long, and always thought it was for the best.

He had lied, and she had come like a lamb to slaughter—worse, she had brought her unsuspecting friends with her.

It was a small mercy that Zuko had left them when he had.

She wondered if he would make good on his promise. She was surprised to realize that part of her hoped he stayed far, far away, however much she wanted to get out of here.

He would die…she had almost…and he wouldn’t listen and he blamed her and her friends and Zuko and her uncle…

She really hoped he was okay. She always thought he didn’t like her—and then he went and did something like that...

Stupid, stupid old man.

Zuko would never forgive her if uncle Iroh died saving her life.

She realized that she was crying…again…it was beginning to become something of a worrisome habit, wasn’t it?

Her father seemed to think that she, Zuko, Zhao, uncle, Mai, Ty Lee…and who knows who all else, were all part of some huge conspiracy against him, and blamed all of them for all the recent set-backs the nation had faced with regards to the war. He’d called her a useless traitor, and tried to kill her.
She’d always managed to stay secure in the knowledge that her father loved her, trusted her, and was glad to have her at his side—that he knew what an asset she was. It was all just a lie she told herself so she could sleep at night.

Her father loved no one, trusted no one, valued no one unless they served his interests of the moment. If he thought you were no longer useful, you were gotten rid of. Like the gardener…and mother…Zuko…cousin Lu Ten…uncle Iroh…grandfather. All he cared about was power and more power—it was never enough.

She had spent years trying to be just like him, and had been so very proud at how well she succeeded.

Did she want to be that person?

Honestly? Most of the time, yes. It was easy to be Imperial Princess Azula, heir to the throne. The only real requirement was absolute obedience to father—no questions, no hesitations, just always give him the answer you knew he was looking for, and kept one eye always trained on him, ready to read your instructions in the tiniest flicker of his eyelids, the crook of his mouth, the set of his shoulders, the height of the flames that eternally shrouded him.

She’d let everything in her freeze over long ago. It made things simpler when you couldn’t feel anything. It made everything so clear and focused. So long as you always did what daddy said, always anticipated everything he wanted, and were perfect always, everything was so clear and easy.

Damn Zuko anyway.

She’d lost some of that focus and certainty at the Eastern Air Temple, and it had all started going downhill from there. The moment she had started having doubts about her father, the ice had started cracking and all this stuff had come bubbling up from beneath the surface—and just look at her now.

It was much, much easier to be frozen.

She could feel a knot loosening in her throat, and life started coming back to her limbs. She couldn’t firebend yet, but that would return in time as well. She managed to crawl over and wedge herself in a corner furthest from the door.

“How ironic. Another chakra cleared while I’m stuck in prison. Might as well go for broke. What else can I do? Yes, I could try to escape, but what then? Even I can’t defeat every firebender and swordsman on the island single-handedly. I’m good but not that good. And father…the Fire Lord…already tried to kill me once today. He might not even bother calling out the guard and just chase after me himself.”

She couldn’t stop the shudder that wracked her as she thought the words. She didn’t let herself think about the possibility of him coming to the prison to get her—she’d be trapped and have nowhere to run to. No—better by far to think of something else.

“What was the next one? The forehead—runs on insight and is blocked by illusions. Psh. What does that even mean? It would be nice if they could make this spiritual mumbo-jumbo more straightforward. I might already have been done by now.”

She closed her eyes and tried to meditate.
“So how’s it been going anyway?” Sokka asked Aang curiously when he returned from his daily training time with Zuko.

“He hasn’t really let me make any fire yet. He has me meditating and doing squats and trying to keep a leaf from burning. I wanna get to the good stuff.”

Toph whapped him in the back of the head.

“Focus, Twinkletoes and control. I’m not going anywhere near you unless you learn them and learn them well. Fire is too dangerous in the hands of someone without both.”

“Well yeah, I know but…”

“Focus and control. Since you still have so much energy, let’s do some earthbending practice.”

“But…”

“No buts. Get moving.”

The rest of them snickered once the two kids were out of sight.

Zuko wandered in not long after, toweling off water droplets from his bare chest. Katara turned away from the sight very casually, and then saw Tom smirking at her in amusement. She really hated that guy sometimes.

Harry wandered over to sit beside the Fire Nation prince, who looked at him curiously.

“Is it alright if I poke around a bit at your scar?”

“Why?”

“I know you’ve had it for a couple of years, and by the looks of it, it was a really bad burn. I wanted to see if there was anything I could do to help.”

“Help?” Zuko asked, very carefully keeping any hope from his voice.

“I don’t think I can get rid of it, if that’s what you’re thinking. I think I can reduce the amount of scar tissue though. Your peripheral vision is probably shot all to hell on that side, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Zuko admitted quietly.

Harry had the other boy turn to face him while he pressed gently across the length of the scar, and examined his ear.

“How’s your vision in that eye?”

“It’s fine, actually. Not quite as good as in my other eye, but functional--they focused on saving my eye, rather than the rest of my face.”

“But you can’t open your eye all the way, which further impedes it.” Harry mused. “Well, that I think I can do something about.”

He drew out a small tub of eye-searingly purple paste.

“This stuff works to help fade out fresh scars, but like I said, yours is old enough that we probably won’t be able to get rid of it, but it should reduce some of the thicker scar tissue.”
He drew his wand and drew out a gob of the stuff to hover in mid-air. “Close your eye. It will tingle, but no more than that.”

Zuko eyed the hovering wad of paste distrustfully, but sighed and closed his eyes. The scar was so thick, he had very little feeling on that side of his face, except when talking or trying to smile, when the damaged skin pulled and wouldn’t stretch correctly. He could mostly just feel the weight of the goop covering him, not much else. Then, it started tingling—like tiny needles prickling all over.

“Alright, sit quietly and keep your eye closed. I don’t know what, if anything, it would do to your eyeball, but it’s probably best not to take chances.”

After an hour, Harry lifted his wand again and scourgified the stuff off of him, which left the other boy flailing and gasping.

“Sorry, simplest way to do it. Let me see.”

Zuko waited tensely for the verdict, trying not to get his hopes up too far.

“Try opening your eye all the way.”

He still couldn’t get it as wide as the other one, but he could get it a lot further open than he had before. Tentatively, he reached up and ran exploring fingers over his scar. A lot of the thick ridges were, if not gone, then severely reduced. He peered into the fountain and examined his face closely. The thickest ridges, which had made it look like his face nearly melted off, or that he’d had thick gobs of half-molten red wax dry on his face, were mostly gone. He still had a scar, but it wasn’t quite as ugly as it had been. That’s when he noticed something.

“I’ve got my other eyebrow back.”

“Oh, yeah. I did that. Did you not want it back? I can get rid of it, if you like.”

“No. Leave it.”

The small bit of added symmetry made you not focus quite so much on the scar—or maybe that was just him, since he was so unused to seeing it there. His ear looked less mangled as well, though it was still scarred as well. He’d gotten so resigned to just looking like he did forever, he hadn’t realized how much it still bothered him on some level, until seeing the worst parts of it so improved. He looked less monstrous by far.

He must have said the last part out loud, because Tom sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Lady preserve me from you martyr types! You were never a monster. That burn on your face was never a sign of evil within you…it was a sign that your father is an enormous asshole, nothing more. And you don’t look like a monster either—you look like a guy who got burned, that’s all.”

Nearby, Harry snorted.

“Hanging around with me is doing terrible things to your vocabulary.”

“Don’t remind me.”

Zuko stood and wobbled for a moment.
“Whoa, careful there—any changes in your vision probably threw your balance off just a bit. You should probably stay away from any edges, and maybe practice some till you’re sure you’ve adjusted properly. I doubt it will take long. The body is quite adaptable, and you’ve already done it one way in reverse.”

“That’s pretty much the same thing my uncle said when the bandages came off.” Zuko admitted quietly, before sighing rather sadly.

“Something wrong?”

“No…well…I was just wondering about uncle and my ship and all the men we pulled out of the sea. They should have had plenty of time to head off to Fire Nation and drop off the men and then come looking for me. Uncle worries. He’s a terrible worrier, actually. He’s probably pulling out his beard by now, wondering where I am…and I don’t know why, but I’ve been kind of unsettled, lately, whenever I think of him.”

“Just send a message with Hedwig.” Katara spoke up. “She can find people pretty much anywhere.”

“I don’t know…I mean, I want to…but what if uncle thinks I’m a traitor? Of course…he didn’t say anything to Chang that one time, so maybe he doesn’t care? No, that can’t be it…uncle loves Fire Nation! Of course…he also respects spirits…he hasn’t liked some of the recent changes.”

“If you’re at all concerned, just don’t tell him where you are exactly, and ask Hedwig to only approach him if he’s alone for the moment, that’s all.” Harry spoke up.

“Do you think I should?”

“Definitely. You obviously love him very much and don’t want to worry him. You should let him know you’re safe and well.” Katara agreed.

“I don’t suppose anyone has anything to write with?”

Harry dug out a brocade box, which he handed over. Zuko blinked and then gave Harry a dirty look.

“That came from my ship.”

“So it did. Good thing I kept it, huh?”

Zuko opened the box to find his writing brushes, ink well, and the like all accounted for, and then lifted out the tray everything nestled in to find a few sheets of paper tucked away underneath.

“Oh, I didn’t even look there. I guess it’s a good thing I didn’t end up selling it.”

Zuko just gave him another dirty look, which rolled off Harry as easily as the first one did.

Iroh groaned and rolled stiffly to a sitting position. He hurt everywhere—his own fault, really. Only an idiot ran into the path of a lightning bolt.

He was in a cell, and had been laying on the hard ground. His wounds had been tended to—small mercy, that. He supposed his brother wanted to make sure he had a nice, long stay in prison.

He was completely mad, it was obvious now. Of course, he’d privately thought as much ever since he’d burned and banished Zuko for speaking out of turn.
Now, he had compounded his crimes by trying to kill his daughter.

Truly, his nephew saw some things more clearly than he himself did. What he saw yesterday was a child, wounded, betrayed and with no stable ground to stand upon, not the cruel, often monstrous child he had long believed her to be—which wasn’t to say she was nice, she wasn’t. He had failed them both, for many years—Azula, it seemed, far worse than her brother.

Zuko had always had the support of his mother, until it was cruelly ripped away, and then, he had him—small help though he may have been through most of it. Azula had only her father, all this time, and the man was mad. Poor child.

He didn’t regret protecting her…though it shamed him to admit, he was almost too late. He’d wasted a half-second thinking about it before moving. Protecting Zuko like that would have been instinct—his sister, not so much, though she was as much his flesh and blood as her brother. Still, he had protected the girl as much as he was able, and now he was in prison, a bit worse for wear. He was also old and out of shape. He’d been living easy the last few years, enjoying his retirement as much as he was able. He was now doing what he could to rectify that.

As he groaned and rolled to his hands and knees to begin doing push-ups, he spared a thought for Azula’s little friends and hoped they were both alright. They were both such lovely girls—and they both had families that would suffer as well.

Lieutenant Jee and the rest of the crew—he didn’t know what had become of any of them either. He only prayed they had not been executed for treason. At least they had left the soldiers they’d rescued in the colonies. They, at least, were safe for the moment.

His brother had much to answer for.

He could only be thankful his nephew was far away, beyond his reach.

He did as much as he could manage, still wounded as he was, and then took a break. Just in time too, as a guard arrived soon after with his dinner—unappetizing mush and a roll, and a small cup of stale water. The guard let him get a good look at the food, which made his stomach gurgle in spite of the poor fare being offered, and then dumped it on the floor.

So, it was like that, was it? Very well. He was not so prideful that he would refuse to bend in such circumstances. Let his brother think him broken and debased—old, senile, and in no way a threat. He ate the food off the ground and licked up the small bits of water gathered on the stone. He needed it, and he would not let his pride deny him what he needed.

“The great general Iroh—Dragon of the West. Just look at you now; a traitor, crawling around on his belly like a worm. You disgust me.”

He let the words roll over him—in one ear and out the other. This man knew nothing, was nothing, to him. He cared not what he thought of him. When the door clanged behind the guard, he pulled himself to his feet, and started doing pull-ups from the bars above him. He was tired, and his wounds ached, but he would do what he needed to do to win free of this place.

He hoped the avatar was training hard as well.

He was trembling and out of breath far too soon for his liking. No matter. So long as he kept at it, all would be well. There was no sense doing himself further injury while trying to whip himself into shape.

There was only one window in the room, high above his head. It wasn’t large enough for a man to fit through, and there was a cage between him and it. It let in a shaft of moonlight—enough to let him
see a bit, but not much else. Well, it isn’t as though he had anything to read, or cards to play…and frankly, the cell wasn’t pretty enough to want to see it clearly. He should probably try to get some sleep.

The room went dark as his thin shaft of moonlight was blocked. When the light returned, the moon glittered off of the feathers of a snow-white owl, who was silently gliding down to where he was. The owl landed on the upper bars of his cage and flapped her wings a few times while clacking her beak at him. There was a message tied to her leg.

Iroh moved to one of the cage walls and held out his arm for her to land on.

“Well, hello again, lovely lady. I will admit, I was not expecting to see you here.” He whispered, while retrieving the tiny message pouch.

He went to sit directly in the shaft of moonlight to read it.

Dear Uncle,

A lot has happened since we last saw each other. After you and the men left to take the soldiers home, I headed towards Serpent’s pass to see what became of the girls. They were in a drill attacking Ba Sing se at the time everything happened. It’s a good thing I found them. Azula was injured, and wasn’t doing too good. The drill apparently got thrown a few hundred feet and landed upside down—with them in it.

I escorted them back to the nearest colony by the most direct route and parted ways with them there. I was going to try locating the ship to find out where I should go next, but then something weird happened.

Do you remember our lost guest? The person responsible came to speak to me, and asked me if I’d figured out my destiny yet, as it was time to meet it. He wanted me to be someone’s teacher. I agreed to go with him.

I wanted to let you know where I was, and that I was safe. More than that, I wanted to make sure you were safe. I’ve been strangely unsettled lately, you see. That person I mentioned suggested I send something along to allow you to send a letter back, just in case, since I was so worried. I’m hoping you don’t need them. You need to dig in the pouch for them a bit. I know it looks like a feather, but you can write with it. It’s somehow full of ink—don’t ask me how. Please write back soon, and let me know that you’re alright. The owl’s name is Hedwig. She was asked to approach you when you were alone. In spite of her coloring, she’s pretty good at going places unseen when she wants to.

Zuko

Iroh listened closely to the sounds around him for a bit, and then turned his back to the door, to shield the letter burning from the sight of the door. The guards would come investigate sudden brightness if they saw it. With a bit of digging he found the feather and a piece of paper. In the dark in a jail cell was hardly the ideal spot to write a letter, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. He must choose his words carefully—enough to let him know what was going on, but not so much that he would come running and get himself killed. Hopefully the avatar or one of the spirits could prevail upon the boy to exercise caution.

When the owl left a short time later, he was able to go to sleep with a cheery heart. Truly, hope was the most potent of medicines.

Harry and Tom spent the morning in the middle garden again, as part of their continued effort to find their animagus forms.
Harry stood and stretched and walked around to relieve some of his frustration.

“Anything?”

“I’m not sure. I’m pretty sure I saw something moving, but that’s it. I have no idea what the thing is, just that something moved.”

“You?”

“The same, actually. It was dark, I saw something moving and I followed, but I lost its trail. Still, it’s progress. If what your godfather said was true we should find them if we keep looking.”

“Yeah, I guess. It’s just frustrating. So, wanna learn tai chi?”

Tom sighed and scratched contemplatively at his chin for a moment, before giving a fatalistic shrug.

“Might as well, I suppose.”

“Way to be enthusiastic.” Harry snorted, before tugging the other boy up from his seat. “Believe me, you’ll like some of the side effects. There’s a reason I’ve stuck with it.”

Tom copied Harry’s stance and movements as best he could.

“Pay attention to how I’m breathing. Keep yourself loose. Flow like water. There’s no rush. There’s nowhere you have to be. Nothing exists outside this garden, or beyond the movement of your arms at this moment. Breathe in, and, breathe out. Feel the energy in your body. Breathe in. Feel it move as you do. Breathe out. Keep everything relaxed and loose. You aren’t the mighty oak—breathe in—that stands firm when the storm comes—breathe out. You are the willow tree—breathe in—that bends with the storm—breathe out—and does not break.”

They went through the whole kata. Tom was surprised to find he was sweating a bit.

“That’s surprisingly tiring. You wouldn’t think moving in slow motion would be a workout of any sort.”

“I did say it was used as an exercise program, and it is a martial art.”

“It’s hard to see how it could be. You move so slow, you’d be dead long before you actually managed to do anything to an attacker.”

“Throw a punch at me.”

Tom shrugged, and did so. Harry deflected it and made a ‘keep going’ gesture. Tom waded in with both arms swinging and was deflected and nearly put on his face, but Harry caught him.

“It’s a soft martial art. It focuses on internal movement of energy and using the attacker’s force against them while not expending much energy of your own. It’s not an aggressive art, so if you want to go around punching people in the face and kicking them, it’s not a good choice. Arts like this follow more of a ‘water wears down the mountain’ philosophy.”

“It’s similar to what Katara does.”

“Yeah, I actually used tai chi as the basis to teach her a water-based fighting style. The four elements and their styles are very different. Air evades—if you punch the air it just moves around it. Their style is mostly defense, with a few attack moves that you apparently don’t learn until the 36th tier—the final one, to attain mastery, though they give you an option to create a new move instead.”
“Ah, pacifists, right.”

“Water redirects and has both attack and defense moves in equal number. Earth withstands, and also has an equal number of offensive and defensive techniques. Fire attacks, and is mostly offensive with just a few defensive moves.”

“Guys! Hedwig’s back! Zuko’s uncle is in prison!”

They both turned to face Aang when he alighted in the middle of the garden.

“He is? When did that happen?”

They all reconvened on the open-air platform at the base of the central temple building. It had become their meeting place, of sorts. The others were all gathered by the fountain. Zuko was sitting with his head in his hands, his feet encased in stone, looking miserable.

“So…your uncle is in prison? Why?”

Zuko filled them in on what little he knew, which wasn’t much, it turned out. The Fire Lord seemed convinced Iroh, Zuko, and the three girls, along with several other people, were all involved in some vast conspiracy against him. Iroh had assured him he was fine for the moment, and the best thing he could do was concentrate on his student and get him prepared to face the Fire Lord before summer’s end.

Aang’s shoulders slumped.

“I had kinda hoped I could skip that part.”

“I think we all hoped that.” Harry assured him. “But if the current Fire Lord seems likely to start things up again and restart the war once he clears away all the so-called conspirators, he needs to be stopped before the comet arrives.”

“You won’t be alone, Aang. We’ll be with you.” Katara assured him.

“We’ll keep anyone from interfering so you can kick the Fire Lord’s ass in peace.” Toph agreed.

“Yeah, and once he’s dead…”

"What!"
"What?"

“You just said when the Fire Lord was dead…” Aang suddenly interrupted, glaring at Sokka.

“Yeah, what of it?”

“I’m not going to kill anyone!”

“Um, avatar, I hate to say this, since he’s my father and all…but, you might not have any choice in the matter. He’s not going to stop, and he’ll be fighting to kill, whether or not you are. If you simply defeat him and leave him alive, he’ll spend the rest of his life plotting against you. He doesn’t care about collateral damage, and he’ll sacrifice anyone and anything to his ambitions.”

“Hope for the best, plan for the worst.” Harry interjected briskly.

“Yeah, Twinkletoes. Let me tell you, if you let the rest of us get killed because the Fire Lord’s life is the only one you value, I will haunt you.”
Zuko stood and glanced at Toph, who considered him a moment, before allowing the stone around his feet to sink back into the ground.

“Come on, let’s get training. We have a lot of work to do if we want you to be ready to face my father.”

Aang shuffled after him, still looking dejected and slightly ill.

When they were both out of earshot, Tom sighed.

“He’s not going to do it. If we all go with him, we’re going to get killed.”

“I have more faith in our abilities than that. It’s not an easy thing to look someone in the eye and kill them. Lots of people don’t have the stomach for it, and it breaks something in them when they cross that line; fighting faceless mooks at a distance while subsumed by the ocean, or dancing in a palace while the action takes place elsewhere is something different.”

Tom grunted, sounding unconvinced.

“Besides, do we really want someone with his kind of power running around eager to kill people who get in his way? I don’t know about you, but that doesn’t sound like much fun to me.”

Sokka, Katara and Toph all shivered at the thought.

“There is that.” Tom admitted. “It’s not my idea of a fun time either.”

“Well…we still have time. Things will work out, I’m sure of it.”

“How far has Aang’s training progressed, does anyone know?”

“They spent three days meditating and doing exercises, and standing around not letting leaves burn. They’ve moved on to basic firebending forms. I can feel them moving around in the courtyard.” Toph answered.

“I’m gonna go watch. Anyone want to join me?” Sokka announced.

“I will!” Katara answered a bit too eagerly.

“I’ll go too. It should be very amusing.” Toph agreed with a smirk.

“Hello, general. I brought you a treat today—jasmine tea. It’s lukewarm at best, but it was the best I could do.”

Iroh smiled at the female guard, a lovely young woman by the name of Ling.

“You are a treasure and a delight my dear, to think of an old man like this.”

Ling just smiled and shook her head at him.

“Those girls you asked about are both here and they’re fine, well, under the circumstances.”

“And my niece?”

“She’s, well…”
“She’s been a handful, I take it?”

“Quite the opposite, actually. She seems to be meditating. I don’t think she’s moved out of the corner of her cell since she’s arrived. I don’t think she’s touched any of her food since she’s arrived either. I started leaving cups of water next to where she’s sitting each day. They’re empty whenever I check, so she’s been drinking them. She seems to have lost weight.”

Iroh looked troubled, but he smiled his thanks to Ming anyway. “Thank you for trying to set my mind at ease this way, my dear. It’s very kind of you.”

“My father still speaks fondly of serving under you.”

“Please convey my regards to your father when next you speak to him. Have you heard anything about the others I inquired about?”

“No sir. I’m not sure what, if anything, happened to your Lieutenant Jee and the others. They’re not here, that’s all I can tell you.”

“That is troubling, but thank you for trying, my dear.”

“I’d better go.”

Iroh waited till he heard the guard’s footsteps vanish into the distance, eating his meager fare and sipping at the jasmine tea the young lady had so thoughtfully procured for him. It was a relief to hear Azula’s young friends were alright for the moment, though the news about his niece was troubling. It seemed Zuko did know his sister well though—meditating, was she? She must actually have gone looking into clearing the chakras after she had left them at the temple. He wondered idly how far she’d gotten. He listened for a bit longer after finishing off the last of his tea with regret, and then moved to grab the bars overhead to begin his daily training regime. His wounds had been tended to and were mostly healed by this point. His dedicated training was slowly melting off the pounds he’d accumulated over the last couple of years. When the time came to act, he would be ready.

Harry settled at the edge of the platform, overlooking the mountains and valley spread out below and in front of him.

He really loved it up here. Even in the deepest rooms, the air circulated freely. The buildings all hung in the open air, and there was an unobstructed view for miles. Spending the early part of his years in a cupboard had given him delight in open spaces that few others really understood—though there had been times when the cupboard had been a haven. No one would follow him in there—it was his own space, where he was safe. It was also his own personal hell—it was cramped and dirty and full of spiders and the air was usually stale. There had been plenty of times in there when he felt he just couldn’t breathe, and he’d resented being locked away like a dangerous animal.

Sitting there, with his legs dangling off the edge, there was a part of him that longed to just let himself fall forward into the open air. Maybe while in freefall, he could sprout wings like a bird, and soar away, free from gravity’s hold.

He was rather surprised when a surprisingly strong grip bunched itself into his robes and pulled him away from the edge.
He looked up and found Tom glaring at him reproachfully, his lips in a thin, tight line.

“What’s with you?”

“Are you trying to tumble off to your death, you idiot?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You were a hairsbreadth away from tumbling right off.” Tom smacked him in the back of the head for good measure.

“Ow.” Harry growled, rubbing his head. “And I was not. I was just thinking how fun it would be to just fly free like a bird.”

“You were so busy imagining, you almost fell off. If you die because you tumbled off this rockheap, I’ll kill you.”

Harry rolled his eyes and tugged the other boy down to sit beside him, which he did with bad grace and a lot of grumbling.

“I’m sorry I worried you”

“I wasn’t worried!”

“But I was perfectly fine, and not nearly in as much danger as you seemed to think. I had a very solid seat, believe me.”

Harry let himself fall backwards, and splayed out comfortably on the ground, while staring out at the open sky he could see beyond his feet.

“I was thinking…”

“Ah. The end of the world is nigh” Tom deadpanned.

“Ha, ha.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“Science. We know magic is a somewhat sentient force, a chaotic force at that. Do you think science is similar, but a force of extreme order?”

“Why are you thinking about something like that?”

“I was remembering what Zuko was telling us about his great-grandfather, Sozin. He one day decides to wipe out the Air Nomads, who by all accounts were the most dedicatedly spiritual of the four nations. There was a guy named Zhao, a Fire Nation naval commander. He was apparently seized with a sudden desire to investigate sandbenders, in the middle of the desert, and stumbled across Wan Shi Tong’s library instead. From what you told me Wan Shi Tong told you, he tore through hundreds of scrolls like a madman and tore out of there. He learned where the physical forms of the moon and ocean spirits were, and decided to destroy them and remove waterbending from the world. Fire Nation has been diligently gathering up benders of all elements and imprisoning them away from their element, which is a slow, madness-inducing, painful way for them to die. Hama of the southern water tribe was the only one of their imprisoned waterbenders who managed to live through it. She figured out how to bend blood and managed to escape, but her mind isn’t quite there. I’m hoping being reunited with her tribe will help, but she may just be like that forever, I don’t
know. The imprisoned earthbenders probably wouldn’t have lasted much longer, had Hakoda and
the others not rescued them when they did. They were nearly catatonic. They didn’t snap out of it
until they reconnected with their elements.”

“Yes, they’re very ruthless people, what of it?”

“It’s more than that. The whole Fire Nation is trying to destroy the magic of this world—even their
own. I think most don’t quite realize that’s what they’re doing, but I’m sure some of them must.
Zuko said they don’t really hold with spirits in Fire Nation. They used to though; they’ve been
systematically undermining spiritual beliefs, except for the Fire Sages, because they serve the Fire
Lord and help enhance the idea of rule by divine right. Zuko’s uncle is considered rather kooky
because he does respect spirits, but he’s old enough and respected enough that people are willing to
overlook his little quirk. They’ve been wiping out the spiritual dimensions of magic, trying to wipe
out magic itself, and have been pushing industrialization for all they’re worth. I think what’s going
on is deeper than just a family of megalomaniacs that want to rule the world.”

“That doesn’t make any sense though. Why would Sozin, who was a magical person himself, work
to destroy the magic in this world?”

“Why would Albus Dumbledore, who was a magical person, work most of his life to undermine
wizards and try to give everyone little choice but to pretend they were muggles? Magical residences
and spaces disappeared in the years he was in charge, and people were left with little choice but to
move into muggle areas and live without magic for the most part. The number of muggleborn and
half-blood witches and wizards was growing by leaps and bounds each year—all of them with half
or all of their families being muggles, raised in muggle areas. The curriculum at Hogwarts has
increasingly tilted towards mugglefication as well. The only students who did well consistently were
those who had very muggle mindsets—rules and laws and everything must be done just so and no
other way—all of it laden with logic. People who are more intuitive magic users tended not to do so
well in class and it discouraged them, while simultaneously giving the logic-minded an inflated sense
of their own power and prowess. I started study groups and practice games in my club to help out the
people like myself who were more intuitive magic-users, and they started blossoming once they
realized the problem wasn’t that they were stupid or powerless, but in how they were being taught,
which wasn’t a way that worked for them.”

“And you think some sort of science-loving, order based entity was responsible?”

“Well, I don’t know, it was just speculation, but it makes me wonder.”

“It might not be an entity, per se. It might just be that the dominant viewpoint begins to shape the
world and everything in it. Before we went into hiding, muggles believed in magic and in magical
patterns. Once we went into hiding, they started espousing their own muggle viewpoint—science,
logic and industrialization in most of the world; magical thinking only in small isolated pockets.”

“A paradigm shift? One that affected the whole world and so leaked into where we were as well?”

“It could well be. Muggles have a power of their own, one very different from ours, but a power
nonetheless…and there’s always been so many more of them than us. The gap was large enough
hundreds of years ago, but with the way they breed their numbers have gotten exponentially higher
in a relatively small time frame. It might be that they just achieved some critical mass that began to
warp the world and everyone’s perceptions of it.”

“A process that would only intensify as more and more muggle-born and raised children began
entering the magical world in droves, brining muggle sensibilities with them and trying to impose
them on our world, a process which reached a peak in the aftermath of the war where everyone’s
knee-jerk reaction became muggles/muggleborn=good, magic/magical heritage=bad. It was an argument I had with my godfather and Remus on more than one occasion. They couldn’t bring themselves to be in any way critical of the muggle world—any part of it. They equated that with evil. It was very frustrating.”

“I can imagine it was.”

“Do you think we’ll be able to stop the same thing from happening here?”

“I think it will take a lot of work, but I also think it can be done. If we can guide their technological progress to be magic-friendly, and work in magic to stave off the detrimental effects of industrialization before they progress any further…yes, I think we can make a real difference. It will help if we can have a place that’s just ours as well. Those peninsulas and the surrounding islands are the size of countries—each one of them. If we can establish ourselves there as a separate power in our own right, rather than tiny settlements and individual families wedged in the cracks of the muggle world, that will help as well.”

“Wizards work best in smaller groups. Even if we have what are essentially a couple of small countries to ourselves, I think it would be a mistake to try to build a monolithic society like Ba Sing Se. I think smaller domains and a council to settle inter-domain disputes would work best.”

“Resurrect the idea of the old warlock’s council? Yes, that would probably be best.”

“We’ll have to go have a look see and really explore those peninsulas and the islands at some point. I don’t know about you, but I want first dibs on a domain.”

“A boy after my own heart. Yes, we should definitely do that.”

“You don’t think…”

“What?”

“Hogwarts. She won’t be left behind, will she?”

“No. Not if either of us have any say in it, she won’t be.”

“Do you think all the wizards of the world will come here if they choose to leave, or do you think there are others like us in other parts of the world who traveled elsewhere and will take their people there?”

“I really couldn’t say. I suppose it could be either way, really…it would make sense, I suppose, if there were others like ourselves who were chosen to find a place for their own people.”

“If that’s true, there’s no telling what we’ll end up with, is there? We might have to throw out a lot of magical knowledge because we can’t use it anymore if some of the plants or animals that are native to places outside Europe don’t travel here with us.”

“Then that’s the price we’ll have to pay. No one ever said it was going to be easy. Nothing ever is.”

“No, nothing ever is.” Harry agreed.

Harry sat up and dug out his flute.

He didn’t know what would happen, in so far as the magical people of their old world were concerned—heck, they didn’t even know if their suppositions were even correct. He didn’t know
how many people he knew would make it across even if they were right—at least 75% of the people he knew had muggle ties, or lived in the muggle world. Sirius for such a long time had been utterly ashamed of his wizarding heritage, and his new bride had a muggle law degree. What if they chose to stay? He might never see either of them again.

He lifted the flute to his lips and shut his eyes and just started playing, letting his worry and confusion express itself through music. After he’d played for a bit, he heard the sound of Tom’s violin join in and add its voice to his flute, expressing many of the same worries.

Gradually, the music began to take on a more upbeat sound—Harry was something of a hopeful idealist underneath it all. Tom, strangely enough, was too. He had originally started gathering people a lifetime ago with an eye towards changing the wizarding world for the better—his own version of better—but horcruxes, madness and many bad decisions had derailed his original plan. His song followed Harry’s lead—optimistic and hopeful, though tentatively so. Idealists they might be, but life had taught them both to be wary of relying on hope alone.

When the last note died away, there was a momentary silence, and then applause.

Toph, Katara, and Sokka were sitting cross-legged on the ground behind them. Katara was quite openly wiping tears from her eyes. Toph and Sokka pretended to have something in their eyes.

“That was amazing…but so sad! I felt like it just reached inside you…and broke your heart.” Katara said quietly.

“Sorry about that. We were just getting something out of our system.”

“What could you be getting out of your system that would feel like that?” Toph demanded.

Tom and Harry exchanged a glance and Harry shrugged and nodded. If they were right about what was going on, they would find out soon enough.

Tom explained their suspicions about what might be happening—and admitted it was based on a scrap of a half-remembered story that might be a simple folktale, nothing more.

“And if we’re right…we don’t know whether all the wizarding communities around the world will hear the call, or only the ones in our little corner of it. And, given a choice to stay where it’s familiar or leave to someplace new and foreign, many will probably choose to stay rather than risk the unknown.”

“And if magic leaves our old world…we will not be able to return there to see them without risking being stranded there ourselves. A lot of people I care about might choose to stay.” Harry added softly.

“The best case scenario, if we’re even correct about what’s happening, is that a mere remnant of a remnant will arrive—all those who do not are lost to us forever.”

“And if we’re wrong about what’s happening…our people will probably die out in another couple of generations anyway...sooner if we’re discovered, which is becoming more and more of a possibility with every passing year. We’re outnumbered to such a degree, and their technological capabilities are getting to the point where it’s becoming harder and harder to effectively hide ourselves. If they find us, we won’t survive. One on one, we always have the advantage…but they delight in making weapons, and they’ve had the capability of wiping out whole cities and everyone in them for decades already—and their weapons have only gotten larger and more destructive since then, and can be launched with deadly accuracy from quite far away, meaning you have no real chance to run.”

“And even if you escape the initial blast, the damage doesn’t stop there, it lingers for years and
“generations afterwards.”

“Yeah. The people who die right away are the lucky ones.”

“How can it be lucky to die?” Katara demanded.

“Yeah…that’s crazy. Where there’s life, there’s hope.” Sokka agreed.

So, Harry explained to them, in stark terms, all he’d read about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was a tale that needed no embellishment—it was chilling and horrifying even with just the barest facts. The number of casualties that resulted from the two attacks nearly broke their minds.

“And they have worse weapons now?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“And this is on top of poisoning the air, water and ground with their factories?”

“Yes.

“Man…your world sucks.”

Harry could feel a lump forming in his throat as he thought of the highlands around Hogwarts, the rolling hills around Godric’s Hollow, the moors around Neville’s house, the prairie around Luna’s, the forbidden forest with its towering, ancient trees, and pictures he’d seen of other parts of the world.

“But our world, some of the people in it. I did say there were places that were still somewhat untouched, though not as many as there were a few generations ago. Our world is beautiful, really.”

“It’s full of beautiful places—they’re just getting harder to find.” Tom agreed quietly.

The two wizards unconsciously leaned into one another for comfort as a terrible wave of homesickness rolled over them. Harry realized then that, even for the two of them, for whom magic was the easy choice to make, it was going to be far harder than he thought to really emigrate for good.

Harry finally sighed and climbed to his feet.

“What will be will be. I’m going to go start dinner.”

The others watched him go and then turned back to Tom.

“You really don’t even know if any of what you were speculating on is happening?”

“Nope. We’re flying blind here. If anything like what we’re thinking ever happened before, it was far before living memory, so there are no guidelines to point the way. For all we know, the process might take a hundred years, or seven, or three—or nothing might be happening at all.”

“Just how many people are we talking?” Toph wondered.

“Our entire world population of witches and wizards could easily fit into one of the peninsulas bordering Chameleon Bay and have room to spread out for generations. We have never been numerous, and our population has been dying out. More and more of our people have been marrying outside our communities and children born of such a union don’t always have the same powers we
do, and they might not show up again for generations. What that means is that there are fewer and fewer prospects for those that remain. That didn’t used to be such a problem—once upon a time it was tradition for a new graduate to go on a world tour. If there were no prospects locally, one could often be found in another community. That practice has been strongly discouraged in recent years, leaving local non-magicals as the only prospects.”

“So…why don’t you just do that then? Just go blend in and become a part of the larger society?” Sokka wondered “especially if it’s hiding as a group that’s dangerous.”

“The non-magical people in our world have two responses to things they don’t understand—dissect it and hope to learn its secrets, or destroy it. Even when a magical child doesn’t know they’re magical, the non-magicals around them can tell they’re not quite like them, and it usually goes badly for the child. My father was a non-magical person. He abandoned my mother, penniless and pregnant with me when he found out what she was. She died giving birth to me in a muggle orphanage. The other children there knew I was different and took great delight in tormenting me until I learned to fight back. Harry was raised with his mother’s non-magical relatives. They worked him like a dog night and day, called him ‘freak’, and did everything in their power to crush his spirit. I know another man whose father was a non-magical person. His father would drink heavily and beat he and his mother for being what they were. He was a child, and didn’t know how to defend himself from the man…she was forbidden to use her magic if she was to live among them as one of them. It’s not fair, you see, for the woman to use her magic against her husband, when he has no similar power to protect himself—nevermind that he might well be twice her size and a lot stronger. That’s the price you pay for breaching our communities—secrecy above all, to protect the rest from discovery. You see, we did try—both before and after secrecy. It doesn’t work.”

The gloomy atmosphere was shattered when a massive bolt of lightning shot across the sky.

"What the hell! It’s cloudless…and it’s not hot enough to be heat lightning…"

They sat tensely for a few moments, and then a second bolt of lightning lit up the sky. They all climbed their feet and looked around warily.

Zuko and Aang wandered out of the temple a few minutes later.

"Aang's completed his firebending training. We're as ready as we're going to be."

After dinner was over, everyone gathered to have a war council. Summer was fast approaching, and they wanted to see the war ended for good, the sooner the better.

"We should contact dad and get together all the people we met on our travels to help us storm Fire Nation." Sokka suggested.

"I disagree. A small strikeforce would have a better chance of getting to the Fire Lord--not to mention there would be far fewer casualties, on both sides." Harry disagreed.

"But you're talking about invading a whole country! Countless soldiers and firebenders…that's madness!" Zuko spluttered.

"The only one who really needs to be taken out is the Fire Lord himself. It's doubtful we'd be able to raise a large enough army to storm the place…and if we did, that would just mean countless unnecessary deaths. No, a small force is probably better." Toph weighed in.
"It still seems too risky!" Katara threw her weight behind Sokka.

"Everyone! Settle down. We don't know yet whether we're going to have to fight at all. Remember, summer solstice is coming up in just a week's time. You remember the kind of far-reaching effects the spring equinox had, right? Well, who knows what effect the solstice will have. Let's concentrate on getting ready for that first." Tom interjected.

"That's not the only big astronomical event coming up. The eclipse will be in two days time. It would be the perfect time to strike, especially if it's just going to be us sneaking in and not a huge force like I was originally thinking." Sokka reminded them.

"My father isn't going to be out in the open during the eclipse. He'll be hidden away, surrounded by non-bending guards mixed with benders on all the approaches. The eclipse lasts for eight minutes. Unless you defeated him in that time, you'd have to fight your way out past all of them, and deal with my father as well."

"Oh…you all know about it, huh?"

"Of course we do. We keep track of stuff like that." Zuko said scathingly.

"How about if we don't strike the Fire Lord on the day of the eclipse?" Harry suggested.

"Huh? Who would we be going after then?" Aang wondered.

"Well…half of Zuko's family is in prison, right? How about we go break them out and high tail it out of there. We can find someplace to lay low until the solstice and then have the solstice dance. Depending on what happens during it, we can then make further plans on what to do next."

"You'd help me do that?"

"Of course. We all know how worried you've been about them. Besides, what are friends for?" Katara replied, while squeezing his arm gently.

Aang's gaze zeroed in on Katara's hands and his own hands slowly clenched on his knees.

"Do you know where they're being held?" Tom asked.

Zuko, who had been struck speechless, pulled himself together and began sketching a rough map in the grit on the floor.

"They're in the tower. It's not too far from the palace, actually. It's where most nobles and others of high rank are sent. Non-noble criminals are sent elsewhere. It's on the main island, inside the caldera, along with the palace and the homes of the highest ranking nobles. It'll still be tricky."

"You forget, we have a number of useful skills on our side, which includes flight capability. I'm sure we'll be fine." Harry waved his hand dismissively.

"How big is this tower? How are we going to find out which part of the tower they're held in? If we only have eight minutes, we don't want to spend it all running up and down stairs and corridors. Would they all be kept together?" Tom wondered.

"Is the place made of stone? If it is, I can probably find them without too much trouble." Toph asserted.

"We should probably send word to your uncle so he'll know to be ready." Sokka pointed out.
"Where are we going to go once we've gotten them out?" Toph wondered.

"Back here, I imagine," Katara shrugged.

"We need to be in Fire Nation for the solstice." Harry reminded her.

"We can go to Ember Island. My family has a house there." Zuko offered.

"Isn't that kind of dangerous?"

"No one has used it since I was little, before my mom disappeared. No one will be looking for us there."

"Alright, if we're going to be in place for the eclipse, we'd probably best head out, the sooner the better. Looks like we'll be living in the tent again. If I'd have known so many people were going to be travelling with me, I would have gotten a bigger one."

"Shh. Clouds don't talk; not only that, but sound carries well over water--especially with it being nighttime." Zuko hissed.

"I think we're almost there. I'm going to check."

"Aang!"

"Shh!"

"Just a bit further. I even saw a clearing I think will hide Appa while we're gone."

Everyone sat tensely in the saddle, wondering if they were going to be bombarded by fireblasts at any moment. Inside the 'cloud' Katara had bent to hide them from sight, they had no visibility beyond the length of Appa's body. They were quite literally flying blind.

"Katara, start letting it thin out. We're right above the edge of the coast. We should be far enough in that no one above will see us too clearly."

Katara bit her lip nervously and began letting the 'cloud' disperse. As it cleared, they realized they were right above a stand of trees, while the back end of the caldera in which the Fire Nation capital city was held, towered far overhead just a short distance away. There was very little flat land on this side of the island; the volcano jutted almost straight out of the ocean. Further east and north were the occupied parts of the island, where there was plenty of space for people to live on and grow crops. Here, there were little more than small jutting shelves that had acquired a bit of greenery over the years; hardly big enough for a good sized homestead, let alone a village of any size.

Appa squeezed down into the midst of the greenery as best he could. He barely fit, and was obviously unhappy at being so confined.

"Ease up, buddy. We'll try to clear away a bit to give you some room." Aang reassured him.

One by one they hopped down--there was very little space for them all to fit.

Harry spotted a space between two trees that looked wide enough and unrolled the tent between them, so the opening was flush with the tree trunks. At least that way they wouldn't be taking up the very little space that Appa had to maneuver in. While he did this, Zuko and Sokka did what they
could to cut back the center greenery a bit so that Appa could at least lay down. Tom, while no one was watching, expanded the space on the 'shelf' a bit—not too much, just enough that they wouldn't be quite on top of one another. Hedwig and Momo made themselves at home in a nearby tree; Hedwig with a small furry animal in her beak, Momo with some scavenged fruit, which he shared with Appa by chucking bits of it in his mouth. Toph was busy as well; she was repeatedly striking the wall of the caldera to get a read on the layout, and trying to figure out the best way to get them close to the prison without being seen. Katara headed into the tent to make dinner, and Aang gathered up the cut down greenery for Appa to eat, supplementing it with some apples. Harry and Tom, once they were done with everything else, put up some basic wards to warn of anyone approaching.

"Well, it'll have to do. Let's head inside."

"Yeah, we should probably rest up before the big prison break tomorrow."
Mai sighed and tried to get comfortable on the pile of filthy rags in the corner that served as a bed. She'd lost track of how long she'd been there--it could have been months, could have been years for all she knew.

Alright, she knew it wasn't years, but damn if it didn't feel like it.

She still couldn't quite believe she was in prison. She wondered if her parents were as well.

The Fire Lord, for some reason, thought she was a traitor. She'd heard what had happened to Zhao's remaining family--and they weren't even immediate kin, only distant cousins. They'd been killed, the family holdings burned to the ground, and their family name struck from all records. It was though they'd never existed. A man who would go so far wouldn't balk at slaying her parents…or her little brother. He wasn't even two yet. He was a child, an innocent.

For all that she'd somewhat resented his birth, and he annoyed her something fierce with his crying and pooping and throwing up all the time--honestly, babies were disgusting--for all that, the thought of him dead left a cold empty space inside. Even her parents, as much as she'd resented them at times for how they'd raised her, she couldn't imagine a world without them. The last she'd heard of any of them they were in the colonies. She could only hope and pray they were still there and hadn't set foot on the mainland. If they were still in the colonies, there was a chance they were alright.

She wished she could stop worrying about it, but the real hell of this place was that there was nothing to do but think. She'd been stuck here in a cage like a dangerous animal, inside a stone room, with a guard outside since she'd arrived. The only human contact she had was the guard that came by once a day with her meal, if it could be called that. If she was lucky, she got stale bread and gruel. If she was unlucky, she didn't even get that.

There were a number of guards in this place that delighted in spitting on the prisoners, and dumping their food just outside the cell, where they could look at it but not eat it. She hadn't yet sunk to the level where she was willing to crawl for it and eat it off the floor…but the more time that passed, the more she feared she might someday sink that low. They gave you just enough to keep you alive, but not much else. She'd never gone hungry before in her life.

She was a spoiled girl from a rich family, who had gotten whatever she wanted all her life--true, in order to get it, she'd had to sit quietly, not draw attention to herself, not talk, just be seen and not heard--but for all that, she'd had it a lot better than most. She'd never gone without a bath for more than a few days, and then only in extreme conditions--like their nightmarish journey away from the drill, after their horrifying defeat at Ba Sing Se. She'd never worn the same clothing for so long. She could look at herself and see how filthy she was. Come to that, she could smell how filthy she was. Her hair itched all the time; she dearly hoped it was just from going unwashed for so long, she really couldn't bear for it to be anything else. Her long nails were ragged, dirty, and her polish was nearly gone. Her toenails were ridiculously long, and her mouth tasted disgusting.
Never, in all her life, did she ever imagine she would end up in such circumstances—that her friends, one of whom was the crown princess herself, were in similar straights just made the whole situation seem more nightmarish and unreal.

Then, as if all the rest weren't bad enough, she was bored.

Now, granted, she always complained of being bored. All she could say was that she really hadn't appreciated how good she'd had it. She would give anything just to be able to leave this room, to look out a window, talk to someone. This place was slowly driving her mad, and she didn't have the faintest clue what to do about it.

She blinked hazily around at her prison, and realized it was getting strangely dark. She was sure nightfall wasn't supposed to be for a few hours yet. In spite of herself, she could feel herself waking out of her daze and growing curious. Distractions in this place were few and far between; even a minor mystery was a welcome change. Pity she couldn't see out the window from here.

Her ears perked as she heard a commotion headed her way. Two mysteries in one day. It seemed she'd gotten lucky. Slowly, she climbed to her feet, to see if she could see anything through the small opening on the door across the room. She leaned tiredly against the bars of her cage and peered for all she was worth, but she couldn't tell if the flickering shadows she thought she saw were real, or the product of a mind grown stifled with boredom. She stiffened as she heard the thud of a body just outside, and her hands clenched nervously on the bars. Had there been a prison break? A riot?

When her door swung open, she could admit she wasn't expecting to see the tiny earth-bender girl Zuko had once kidnapped.

"Knife girl?"

"Yeah." Her voice croaked like a frog's. How embarrassing. It had been quite a while since she'd used it.

The little earthbender swaggered into the room and tapped the lock with her hand, while seeming to listen. After a moment, she bent the end of a piece of a bracelet she was wearing on her upper arm into a serviceable key and popped the lock.

"Let's go, Knife girl. Time's a wasting. We've got about five minutes till the firebenders get their powers back, and I'd like to be out of here by then."

Mai didn't need to be told twice. Who cared if everyone thought her a traitor, after being rescued by an earthbender? They already thought her a traitor. At least she'd be able to get a bath and some clean clothes.

"Right behind you."

Just outside, the guard who delighted in dumping her food on the ground and spitting at her was chained to the wall with restraints grown out of the rock face. His face twisted in a disgusted sneer, and she could see he was ready to spit again.

Not this time.

A swift knee to the groin left him whimpering, then the two girls took off running down the hall. Mai could have wept. Just ahead she could see Ty Lee running alongside the dragon spirits, and further ahead she could see Zuko and Azula. They all turned down yet another tunnel and saw the water tribe siblings, the avatar and general Iroh. The avatar made a hole in the ground and leapt
down into it, swiftly followed by the others. The little earthbender motioned her to head down ahead of her. She jumped down into the hole without stopping, and found herself in a tunnel. The earthbender girl landed behind her and closed the entrance up above. There were lights flickering ahead; she assumed they must have torches or something. She started running without needing to be told. She wanted to be as far away from here as humanly possible when the alarm sounded. She nearly stopped when she heard the faint klaxon signaling a prison-break sound far overhead. She picked up the pace and kept running.

"My lady...are you sure this course of action is wise?"

The lady in question turned away from the view of the garden she'd been admiring to face her old friend. Her face was drawn, and her clothing travel-stained. She had come quite a distance in a very short time -- relatively speaking -- and she was exhausted. Her journey was not yet finished though. She had one last hurdle to cross -- namely, convincing her old friend, who had been instrumental to her travels thus far, to let her go the distance.

"Wise? Perhaps not. It is necessary, nonetheless."

"But, my lady, you'll be killed!"

"Do try to have some faith in me."

"It isn't that I haven't faith in you, I have only the highest regard for you and for your abilities, you know this. You are, however, but one woman. What can you possibly hope to do against the forces that will be arrayed against you? I beg you to reconsider."

"Tell me, master Piandao, when the army came for you, to protest your retirement, did you consider simply bending your neck and going with them?" the lady demanded. Master Piandao opened his mouth to answer, and then hesitated at the sight of her arched brow and wry smile. His shoulders slumped and he let out a breath, conceding her the victory.

"Not even for a moment."

"A hundred men, was it not? And you fought them all."

"None of those hundred was the Fire Lord, my lady. They weren't even imperial firebenders."

"True." she agreed. "And yet, is the situation truly any different? Moments come, dear friend, as well you know, when you must make the decisions that shape the course of your life. I had such a moment nine years ago, and I warned him then what my price was. He was careful enough to stick to the letter of our agreement, if not the spirit. I should have returned four years ago, to make my thoughts on the matter clear. He was careful enough to stick to the letter of our agreement, if not the spirit. I should have returned four years ago, to make my thoughts on the matter clear. It is to my own shame that I did not, though in my defense, it took a very long time for news to reach me. I can no longer stand aside and do nothing. He has gone too far, and I will not allow the matter to rest this time."

"I understand." Piandao sighed. "I've arranged you transport to the capital. I should warn you that it isn't likely to be a very comfortable ride."

"Fishing boat?" the lady asked resignedly.

"Happily, no. Fruit. It draws as many flies as the fishing boats do, though it at least smells better."

"So long as it gets me where I need to be, I'm happy. I'm even happier that I needn't hide out for
several extra days waiting for the stink to fade." she added with a small laugh. 

Piandao smirked in amusement, though his mirth faded swiftly. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"You've done more than enough for me already, old friend. I'll not have you needlessly endangering your life or your livelihood over this. It's a family matter, after all."

Pandao didn't look happy, but he nodded his agreement nonetheless. "Your transport leaves with the morning tide."

"Thank you again, old friend, for all your help."

Iroh climbed out of the tent and looked around at the courtyard he found himself in.

"This is not the clearing you took us all to."

One by one the rest of the former inmates climbed out behind him. They were all looking much better than they had a few hours previously—they'd all happily taken advantage of the chance to get cleaned up and fed.

"Where on earth are we?"

"Ember Island, in our old house." Zuko explained as he followed them out.

"How did we get here?" Ty Lee wondered.

"We flew while you were all getting cleaned up." Harry replied, tapping the carpet under his foot. "We saw no good reason to stick around."

Mai jumped as Appa suddenly materialized nearby, as did Aang, Toph and Tom, Katara and Sokka.

"All that being invisible stuff still gives me the heebie jeebies." Sokka complained as he climbed out of Appa's saddle.

"I thought it was neat!" Aang said cheerfully.

"Why are we still in Fire Nation though? I would think it would be wise to leave the country." Mai interjected.

"No, we need to be in Fire Nation for the summer solstice so we can end the war and bring the world into balance already." Harry disagreed.

"Come again?"

"You know all the weirdness with the Earth Kingdom turning against us…and the weird stuff with the water when we were at the Eastern Air Temple? Apparently they were dancing at the time and that's what caused it." Zuko explained.

"All that happened because you were dancing?" Mai demanded, disbelief clear in her voice.

"Well, it was special dancing, but yeah, pretty much."

"Ah, I see." Iroh nodded sagely.
"Ah, I see? I don't think so. I want details." Azula demanded.

"Each of the benders in the world is drawing on a particular pair of entities through which they gain their bending powers. Aang, as the Avatar of the earth, is able to draw on all of these entities equally. Each nation and element has a particular season associated with it. The cross quarters of the year are when the spirit world and the material world are most closely aligned and when those powers can be drawn upon to enact larger works than would usually be the case. Among our people, we know how to tap into those moments, though the only reason it's had such massive effects here is because Aang was involved. He's the bridge to the spirit world, master of the four elements, and avatar of the spirit of the earth. Bit by bit, the war has ended, the elements and nations are being brought back into balance. Summer solstice is the last step. If all goes well, there should be peace after this, and everyone should be able to just get on with their lives already."

"How are any of us going to be able to do that? We'll still be fugitives." Azula pointed out.

"Not necessarily. During the spring equinox, a lot of dirty deeds done by Long Feng and the Dai Li were uncovered, and everyone taking part in the dance just knew about all of it. I don't see any reason it can't work in reverse. None of you were ever traitors to your nation or your people. Come solstice, everyone should know that."

It was obvious none of the girls were particularly satisfied with their explanation, though there wasn’t much they could do about it. They were fugitives, and dependent on the avatar and his friends to escape the island safely.

"If we're going to be here for at least a week, we need to find some way to lay in supplies. I don't suppose any of you has a stash of money lying around?" Azula asked.

"Fire Nation money? No."

"Harry's got food in his tent."

"That's really not going to hold all of us. When I packed, I laid in what I thought would be food enough for me for several months. The only reason it's lasted as long as it has is because we have been supplementing it, and were given supplies by King Bumi, King Kuei, and the Northern Water Tribe at different points. I think I have one pot of soup left, some fruit and a couple of slabs of meat--and that was mostly gathered at the Western Air Temple."

"Ah, well, no worries. I can write to a friend of mine who's not too far from here. I'm sure he'd be willing to help us out for a bit." Iroh said cheerfully.

"Who are you going to write to?"

"Master Piandao. He's right over on Shu Jing."

"Who's master Piandao?" Toph wondered.

"He's a famous sword master. Rumor has it that when he decided to retire from the army, a hundred men were sent to convince him he was going back. He fought them all and won, and was allowed to just stay out of the war. He and Jeong Jeong the deserter are the only ones known to have left the army and lived." Azula said grumpily. "And you're friends with this traitor?"

"Yes, I do in fact consider him a good friend."

"Sword master, eh? And he's right over on Shu Jing? Write up your letter, Iroh. Sokka and I will deliver it in person." Harry decided.
"Huh? We will?"

"Sure. Aang and Katara got to test themselves against Master Pakku to get an idea of where they stood in water bending. It's now your turn. A famous swordsman who has epic battles sounds like just the ticket. Zuko, you should come with us as well. You're a swordsman."

"I'll pass, thanks. I know I'm good enough to get by; that's all I'm really concerned with, besides, Piandao was actually one of my trainers, though my main sword master was my mother."

"Suit yourself."

"I don't suppose anyone has anything to write with?" Iroh asked.

"Zuko does." Harry said cheerfully.

Zuko gave him a dirty look, before heading off to retrieve the box Harry had stolen from his ship months prior.

"I think that should be Shu Jing just ahead."

"Good. I'm tired of flying around."

"I don't know what you're complaining about. You've been lounging around in the tent while I've been steering."

"Yeah, well, it's boring being in there by myself."

"You might as well head back in. I'm going to make us invisible for the approach."

"Fine."

Harry could see Hedwig up ahead circling downward to approach a large house on a hillside. This Piandao fellow must be the local noble, if the size of the place was anything to go by. Iroh had suggested sending his letter ahead so that Piandao would be expecting them, and have some time to see to his request. Harry couldn't have really objected if he'd wanted to, given Hedwig's indignation that he wanted to take a letter that was rightfully hers. It probably was better this way. He landed the carpet out of sight between some trees on the side of the road, and headed inside, removing his disillusionment as he went.

"Are we there?"

"Yeah, it's the big house just across the way there."

"You're...kind of red. Why are you all red?"

"Because I'm an idiot. I've been flying around over the ocean in the bloody tropics without a care in the world. I'm all sunburnt."

Sokka reached out to touch, but Harry moved away.

"Don't. It's starting to hurt. It's no different than getting burned by fire or scalded by hot water. Don't worry, I've got something for it, and I can whip up something in short order to protect me from further exposure. It won't take too long. We can go see Piandao when I'm done. It will give him time to read Iroh's letter and make whatever arrangements he's going to make."
Harry dug out his potions stores and began slathering bright orange paste across the red parts of his body—his arms, lower legs, face and neck; everything else was covered. Once he'd done that, he began digging for his ingredients and cauldron and began preparing a potion that acted as a sunscreen and tanning agent in one—something he really should have thought to make before coming to the tropics. Fair English skin did not do well in direct sunlight.

He got the potion made and set aside to cool, just in time for the burn cream to be removed. He went and took a quick shower, and changed into lightweight clothing that didn't leave so much skin exposed, but would nevertheless allow him freedom of movement. He wanted to make a good showing when he faced the sword master, after all.

"Wow. You're not red anymore, but you're still a different color than you started out. You've gotten a lot darker."

"Yeah. I'll still have to be somewhat careful being out in the sun too much. The stuff I just made should help—it should protect me from burning while allowing me to tan instead." He doled out a bit and swabbed down his face and neck.

"Okay. We can head out now."

"You want to head out looking all shiny like that?"

"It'll absorb into my skin in a few minutes and you won't even notice it's there. Don't worry about it."

"If you say so. Let's go challenge ourselves a sword master!"

"Yee-HA"

"Eh?"

"Seemed called for."

"Well, YEEE-ha to you too."

Sokka started fidgeting and wiping his hands against his pants as they walked, and seemed to get more twitchy the closer they got to Piandao's house.

"Relax, Sokka. You'll do fine. I wouldn't have suggested this if I didn't think you'd make a good showing. Remember, even if you lose, it's no disgrace if the guy you're facing is a renowned master. Just do your best, don't hold back, but treat it as just any other training exercise. He's not an enemy you need to defeat, he's a measure of how far you've come and how far, if at all, you still have to travel. I'll only be disappointed if you don't give it your all, the outcome is immaterial."

As they approached the door Harry removed his glasses and cast a charm on each eye so he could still see.

"Why are you doing that?"

"If this guy is even half as good as rumored, I don't want to have any exploitable disadvantages if I can help it."

"Why don't you just do that all the time then?"

"It makes my eyes tired if I have it on for too long for some reason, so it's not really a long-term
solution. It's easier to just wear my glasses on a day to day basis--but for short term things like this it's fine. So, you ready?"

"As I'll ever be." Sokka murmured. He took a deep breath, held it and let it out, before straightening his shoulders and trying to look calm and composed. Harry clapped him on the shoulder when he nodded his readiness and reached up to sound the door knocker.

"Notice anything interesting, Sokka?"

"White lotus on the door, lion-turtle door knocker. Maybe there's something to your thoughts on there being a secret society of old men who play pai sho after all."

The door opened and a portly gentleman with a grey topknot surveyed them both, looking rather unimpressed.

"Would you be Ha-ri and So-ka?"

"Harry and Sokka. Yes, that would be we."

The man looked down his nose at them a moment longer, before stepping aside. "Master Piandao is expecting you."

"Thank you, Mr. Cheerful."

Sokka giggled as he followed after him. The manservant just sighed and closed the door.

Piandao's estate was a lavish place, though uncluttered. It was filled with wide open spaces, with sparse decoration used to best effect. It was a peaceful place, and quiet as well. By the sound of it the only people in the whole large building were themselves, the manservant who was leading them, and Master Piandao himself.

They were shown into a long room that opened out onto the gardens beyond. Master Piandao was seated at a low table, sipping tea when they arrived. Even seated, he was an impressive figure. He had swarthy skin, black hair in a topknot, that was just starting to go grey, and a small, neat goatee. He was dressed in a high-necked, long-sleeved robe slit high on the sides, with gold embroidery around the collar and cuffs, with loose red pants beneath. He could feel Sokka practically vibrating in excitement next to him. The guy looked the part of a venerable sword master--he couldn't wait to actually see him in action.

Harry brought them to a stop about two-thirds of the way into the room and knelt down on the floor, laying his sword flat in front of him, and then sat quietly, hands on his thighs to wait. Sokka copied him with barely any hesitation. He was still nervous, he could tell, judging by how his fingers were twitching on his thighs, and his palms were sweating a bit. Harry was calm enough--he honestly didn't know if he measured up to 'master level', and he wasn't too concerned about it one way or another. While he'd like the chance to fight the guy, he really wanted this for Sokka. Sokka needed this affirmation.

Though he was sure it had never been done intentionally, he had gotten shafted to the side a lot in the last few years. The Southern Water Tribe had lots of warriors, and when they'd all left for war, he'd been only a 'half-weaned cub', whereas Katara, as the last waterbender of her tribe, had held almost sacred status among her people. As the only non-bender in their group, except for the few times Suki was with them, he often was left feeling that his contributions weren't as valuable or appreciated--though honestly, Harry himself never felt that way, and tried to reassure him of that whenever he
could. It was part of the reason he'd invested so much time into teaching him, and tried to include him on separate missions for the two of them whenever he could. He knew Sokka had a lot to contribute if he was just given a chance to--he'd done what he could to make sure he had those chances to shine, away from his sister's long shadow, and the Avatar's myth and power.

As the silence stretched on, Sokka began fidgeting a little more obviously. Harry called up his meditation quiet place and wrapped serenity around himself like a shield. He could feel Sokka peering at him from the corner of his eye, and felt him copy him a moment later. The tension leaked out of him and he was able to sit quietly while master Piandao surveyed them both. Harry could admit he was curious what he saw when he looked at them both. He was content to wait. They had a couple of days until the solstice, and they'd left what food they had back with the others. There was no rush. They could sit here quietly for as long as Piandao wanted to play this game.

"So, you've come to challenge me, have you?"

"That was the plan, master Piandao."

"Let me guess, you're the best swordsmen in your little villages, and you feel that entitles you to study under me."

"I see our mutual friend didn't tell you much about us at all. No. Sokka is my student in the art of the sword. The problem is, I myself have never actually been accredited by any sword master, and so I honestly have no real yardstick upon which to measure either his progress, or my own for that matter. I simply seized upon the opportunity when it presented itself to give my student, at least, the opportunity to do so."

"Is that so? How did you learn the art of the sword if you've never studied with any master?"

"Training dummy."

"A training dummy."

"I wouldn't be dismissive, nor underestimate Sokka's skill because of it. It was a very…effective…training dummy. However, I'm sure you can understand our desire for a human measurement."

Piandao studied them both a moment longer.

"Very well. Your student can face my current apprentice. We'll see how he stacks up."

"Thank you for the opportunity, Master Piandao."

The manservant they'd met earlier, who had the unfortunate name of Fat, seemed to be master Piandao's current apprentice, though his primary function was butler and cook. Fat took Sokka off so they could both put on some armor for their spar--a chest plate, shoulder guards and helmet that rather resembled pads worn by football players, all done in Fire Nation colors of red and gold. When they were ready, they moved down into the open courtyard while Harry and Master Piandao watched from above on the patio overlooking the garden.

Fat and Sokka began circling one another and testing each other. For a minute or so the clack of their wooden swords was the only sound. Piandao's face remained impassive, so Harry couldn't tell what he was thinking about what he saw. Harry wasn't sure how qualified he was to judge, but from what he'd seen so far, unless Fat was a very good actor, Sokka had already surpassed him--something which he proved not long after. Once he felt he'd gotten the other man's measure, he pressed his
advantage and soon had him disarmed and at his mercy.

Harry could feel Piandao's gaze on him, so he turned and gave him a disarming grin in return. "I told you it was a very effective training dummy."

Sokka looked up at the two of them. Harry grinned at him as well and gave him a thumb's up.

"So, have we caught your interest?"

Piandao smiled wryly at the young man beside him. "Indeed. I will say you've definitely caught my interest." His eyes crinkled in amusement a moment later when Harry said 'cool' and bounced on his toes like an excited child.

Sokka helped Fat up off the ground and the two of the rejoined them on the patio. Sokka's stomach rumbled as they approached, and his face blushed scarlet. Sokka rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. "Sorry about that. It's been awhile since breakfast."

Piandao shook his head and led them back inside. "Think nothing of it. I'm sure we can round up a little something before your next bout."

"Next bout? Does that mean…"

"Yes. I'll give you the assessment you were looking for."

Fat, who looked even more dour than he had when they'd first arrived, wandered off to prepare lunch.

Sokka, much as Harry had done just moments before, bounced on his toes and giddily said 'cool'.

Piandao led them back inside, though this time he took them to another room, which seemed to be a study.

"Pai sho." Harry noted, while subtly nudging Sokka with his elbow. They traded a significant look and nod.

"Do either of you play?"

"We got a quick and dirty introduction to the game from Master Pakku a while back. He's a friend of yours, right?"

Piandao looked at them both curiously. "Pakku isn't a Fire Nation name. What makes you think I know him?"

"Well, you're both part of the secret society of old guys, right? You must be the youngest guy there." Sokka replied.

Piandao's eyebrow raised and he leaned against his desk, which was across the way from the pai sho table, and eyed them both with bemused curiosity.

"Secret society of old guys?"

"We don't know what you're all called, but it has something to do with white lotuses, pai sho and lion turtles. Master Pakku asked me a lot of weird questions when he was teaching me the game, and he mentioned the white lotus tile a lot. I saw some white lotuses and lion turtles in King Bumi's
study, and a pai sho table as well. I know Iroh not only plays pai sho, but he keeps a white lotus tile in his sleeve, and he had a lion turtle statue in his quarters on Zuko's ship. We sold it for a pretty penny in Gaoling. I figure that guy Azula mentioned, Jeong Jeong the deserter is probably one of you guys as well. She said you and he were the only two to ever leave the Fire Nation army and live. He's a firebender. If you're some kind of avatar watch group, chances are he could have been a possibility to be Aang's firebending teacher since he would have been outside of Fire nation control, and thus somewhat safe to approach. The fact that Iroh not only sent to you for help, and you have lion turtles and white lotuses as part of the décor of your home puts you in the same group."

"If I were really part of a secret society, revealing to me that you know about it could be rather dangerous."

"If we thought you were a group of assassins, black-ops or some sort of paramilitary organization, we wouldn't have done so." Harry explained as he lifted the white lotus tile from the board.

"The lotus is often a symbol of enlightenment, as is the lion-turtle. Pai Sho is a strategy game that represents the whole world, but there can be no true winner or loser. The best that can be hoped for as a final outcome is balance between all the forces. The white lotus is used primarily to achieve such a balance. When you add in that all the members we've identified so far represent all the nations that currently exist in the world, who have maintained ties in spite of a world war that has lasted the last hundred years, it seems highly unlikely you're the sort of secret society that would kill a couple of kids for stumbling upon your secret."

"Say you're right. Why tell me?"

"Because it's nice to get confirmation sometimes."

"Very impressive, I must say." Piandao sighed. "Yes, we're all members of the Order of the White Lotus. It was founded centuries ago by several renowned scholars in search of wisdom, beauty and truth. It has always transcended political ties between nations and has worked to facilitate the sharing of knowledge across borders. I, as well as many of my fellow members, have studied among the people of many nations and have learned from them. In the current political climate, by maintaining our ties across borders, we've seen to it that a lot of knowledge that might otherwise have been lost was not."

"So we were right? Wow. Score one for the home team!" Sokka chortled as he and Harry bumped fists.

Piandao's eyes crinkled in amusement and he bit his lip for a moment. They had a feeling he was trying not to laugh at them.

They had lunch out in the garden. The food was a lot spicier than either of them was used to.

"Have you never had Fire Nation cuisine before? Fat made it less spicy than usual in deference to you both."

"No, first time. We've only been in Fire Nation for a very short time, and we were busy during most of it, so what food we ate was food we already had with us."

"It's good." Sokka reassured him.

"I'm sure Fat will be glad to hear you think so."
Piandao was an interesting guy. He told them a bit about his travels and different people he studied with, and how he'd rebuilt and refurbished the house they were in on his own upon his return to Fire Nation after leaving the army. It was once a noble's house that had been long abandoned. He put in the work to make it a showplace again.

When lunch was over, Sokka was led off, and returned in an outfit identical to master Piandao's--long black robe with gold embroidery and loose red pants beneath it, and his hair had been put up in a Fire Nation topknot. He had his own sword this time, not the wooden one given to him for his assessment by Fat earlier. This time, Fat and Harry watched from the balcony, each holding the sheathes for the others' swords, while master Piandao and Sokka headed down to the courtyard. They bowed to one another and moved into position.

Sokka was a bit more confident this time around, given how well he'd done against Fat.

His confidence didn't last for long. Master Piandao was fast, not to mention agile for a guy who was going grey. He was also strong, given how Sokka seemed to be straining against his blows. It was a much longer fight this time, and it ranged all over the courtyard, with Sokka on the defensive through most of it, though he did get the upper hand several times. It wasn't quite enough to win the day--Sokka managed to get dust in the man's eyes, but they discovered he could fight blind, and seemed to be able to sense Sokka's movements while so hindered. He also knew the terrain well enough that he maneuvered around obstacles while like that as well. Piandao did finally defeat Sokka, though it was a much closer battle than it seemed Piandao was expecting. He pulled Sokka to his feet and signalled to Fat, who tossed him his sheath. Still mostly blind, he caught the sheath on his sword without looking, something which had Sokka and Harry both nearly squealing in a sudden bout of fanboyism. It was official--master Piandao was cool.

Piandao washed the dust from his face and eyes and eyed Sokka for a moment before nodding to himself.

"I'm very impressed, Sokka, given your age. The only thing I've really got over you at the moment is experience, and you'll gain that in time. You managed to keep your head, you made good use of the terrain, and played to your strengths wherever possible. I can honestly say you'll probably surpass me one day. Your master taught you well, though he wouldn't have been able to do so unless he had good material to work with. Well done."

Sokka positively beamed. Harry smiled to himself. He'd been right, Sokka needed this. He needed an adult authority figure to praise him and give him an honest assessment of his skills. He knew that, though Sokka held Harry himself in high regard, the fact that he was just a kid, like him, would always leave him wondering if he quite measured up. This trip was worth it just to lay those fears to rest.

"Hey guys! You're back! You were gone awhile."

"What's with the outfits?"

"I take it Master Piandao agreed to test your skills?"

"You should have seen it! It was awesome!" Harry praised.

"I lost though. You fought the guy to draw!"

"You fought Master Piandao to a draw?" Iroh said with some surprise.
"We both had it in us to keep going. He just felt he'd seen enough to acknowledge me a master swordsman. Had we kept fighting, I don't know if I would have beat him or not."

"I wouldn't take him too lightly, young warrior. Master Piandao has studied all over the world, and is widely regarded as the best swordsman the world has to offer."

"I'm neither taking him lightly nor disparaging his skill in any way. I was very impressed with Master Piandao, both as a warrior and as a person. The thing is, I had something of an advantage over most students of the sword. I learned from a training dummy that was a master of a good dozen sword types and styles. What's more, it had different levels you could train at. Level one followed a human fatigue trajectory. Level two stayed the same throughout. Level three, which is what I usually trained with, got faster and stronger the longer the fight wore on. Most people can't lay claim to either that kind of pressure, nor the sheer variety of opponents that I can. Sokka could have won, I think. Master Piandao did say the only thing he really lacked is experience, and he acknowledged that he could one day surpass him. He said he was very impressed with him overall, so don't let the fact that he lost that particular bout fool you into thinking he didn't do well. He did. He fought Master Piandao's current apprentice before he faced him. I only faced Piandao himself, this morning before we left Shu Jing."

"That's very impressive. He must have been, to have agreed to test you both as he did. Many young hopefuls travel to see him in hopes of training under him. It's the rare few he actually finds to be worth his time."

"Go, us!"

"Say, where's Tom?"

"He's hiding out in the house. He got burned by the sun."

"Oh, poor guy. I had all the burn cream with me. I better go see him."

"I used water bending healing on him. He's alright, he just doesn't want to get burned again. Is this just some weird thing with your people?" Katara assured him.

"Where we live is not only fairly far north, it's also rainy and misty a lot of the time. We don't get exposed to a lot of direct sunlight, and when we do, we burn. Our skin doesn't have much protection against it--even the palest of you is actually a lot darker than we are, so you all have some built in protection."

"You're a lot darker than you were when you left."

"I got burned as well, but I had something to put on it and I made something to protect my skin afterwards, so I've been slowly tanning since then. I've just got get Tom swabbed down so he can safely go outside as well."

"You guys did bring food, right? We ate the last of what there was for breakfast earlier. We were starting to get worried."

"Yeah, we brought plenty to tide us all over. Master Piandao was quite generous."

Harry left the others to unload the tent of the supplies Piandao had given them. He found Tom hiding out in one of the bedrooms, with Harry's trunk open beside him. He'd been digging into his books again.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't think to leave any burn cream behind. I didn't even think about it until I got
burned myself on the way to Shu Jing. I made up some sunscreen though, so we should both be okay for the remainder of our stay. We should probably both swab ourselves down and spend some time in the courtyard with our shirts off. I don't know about you, but I look ridiculous."

Tom eyed him curiously as he stripped out of the outfit Piandao had given him till he was just in a pair of shorts. Harry's lower legs, arms, face and neck were a pale honey gold. His chest, back and stomach were blindingly white in comparison. Tom snorted, and sat forward to take off his shirt. He stood and did a slow spin. Tom's face and the tops of his shoulder and outer arms, and the front of his legs were pale gold. The rest of him was as blindingly white as Harry was.

"Yeah, we seriously need to even out our tans some before we dare show ourselves on the beach."
always had the best. The Water Tribe are a people who know how to party. I mean, think about it--when winter really sets in, we're mostly stuck in our igloos. We're really good at thinking of ways to amuse ourselves." Sokka disagreed.

"Aren't you going to speak up on behalf of the Earth Kingdom?" Ty Lee asked Toph curiously.

"I've only been to one Earth Kingdom party. There wasn't any music or dancing, there was just a lot of people standing around being important. It was kind of exhausting really." Toph snorted.

"Oh. I've been to parties like that. Yeah, not much fun."

They finished out the set and came to a halt.

"Excellent! I think we're ready." Harry said with a smile as he pocketed the red music cube.

"Goody! I'm going to head back to the beach. Anyone want to join me?" Ty Lee chirped.

"Ooh! Me!"

"Hold up a second, Aang."

"What?"

Tom flicked his wand at him and touched the blue tattoos that covered his body. While he was doing that, Harry 'hairbended' him again. Aang made a face and ran his hand unhappily through the hair that was once again gracing his normally bald skull.

"Should he really be going out? The tattoos are kind of conspicuous." Zuko said worriedly.

"I've just taken care of that." Tom assured him.

"Huh? How?"

"The only people who will notice the tattoos are people who already know about them, otherwise, it will just seem to be nothing of particular note and will be ignored." Tom explained, before flicking his wand a second time at Zuko's scar.

"Great! Let's go!"

The others didn't need to be told twice, they headed down to the beach without further argument--all except for Iroh, who was planning to enjoy the quiet courtyard and a nice cup of tea while the teenagers were gone.

"I don't know what's going on, but the whole island looks like a kicked-over fire-ant hill. No offense to you, ma'am, whoever you are, but I shoulda known better than to let you on my ship."

"Relax. No one here is looking for me or expecting me. My husband and I had some difficulties in the past and parted on poor terms. I simply didn't want to advertise that I was on my way."

"Ah. Well, that's a relief. I don't need trouble."

"So, do I pass muster as a simple clerk?"

"Aye, well enough, though even in homespun ye look a might fine to be working on an old wreck like this one."
"Thank you for the complement, though I think any worries you have on that score are unnecessary. People usually see what they expect to see."

"We'd best hush up now. Looks like the inspectors are headed this way."

"Good. Maybe we can find out what's going on."

Captain and lady both stood aside as a troop of home guard came aboard the ship and inspected it from top to bottom, looking for stowaways. They found nothing but the expected crates of fruit, the crew and the shipping clerk.

"There seems to be some trouble afoot. Can you tell us what's going on? Trouble is best avoided if you know to look for it after all."

"There was a mass prison break a few days ago."

"Prison break! Are they dangerous?"

"Extremely so."

"What were they in for?"

"Treason, sedition, conspiracy, you name it."

"My word!"

"If you see any of these people, alert the guard at once. Do not attempt to subdue any of them on your own."

The lady moved so she could peer over the captain's shoulder.

"Half the people on this leaflet are just children by the look of it!"

"Dangerous children. Don't be fooled by their youth, ma'am. One of those children is the crown princess. The old fellow up top is none other than the Dragon of the West himself."

"The crown princess and former crown prince, General Iroh are being accused of treason and sedition? On what grounds? They're of the royal family."

"They were accused and arrested on word of the Fire Lord himself, ma'am. Our job is to apprehend them for execution."

"Execution!"

"Yes, ma'am. They were to be executed publicly on the solstice, which is probably why the traitorous cowards fled."

"Or perhaps they were innocent and fled to escape an unjust death sentence hanging over their heads. The crown princess was heir apparent, was she not? What reason would such a person have to betray the nation?"

"A word of advice, ma'am. It's unwise to go around saying such things. If the Fire Lord himself has declared them guilty, they're guilty."

"Do excuse my wife, sirs. She has a woman's compassionate heart. Imagining such young girls as traitors and criminals is difficult for her."
The lady nodded, looking abashed.

She kept her head down and mouth closed when they were cleared to begin unloading, and busied herself checking the manifests against the cargo that was unloaded. Inside she was burning.

It was a near thing, but she managed to slip past the guards long enough to make her way to one of the hidden tunnels beneath the city. The royal family was a paranoid bunch, and had such tunnels hidden everywhere so they could escape should the fates turn against them. It went without saying that they could safely traverse them—even full of lava as many of them were. The royal family produced strong firebenders, it always had. She herself was no firebender, and so traversing these tunnels was considerably more hazardous for her.

It was a risk she was willing to take…and she'd survived those tunnels once before.

Firebenders usually rose with the sun, which meant Zuko, Azula, and Iroh were all awake and alert at dawn on the summer solstice. Aang and his group had already taken part in celebrating the rest of the seasons; they could feel the approach of the solstice like a fever in their blood. Ty Lee wasn't a bender, but she was one of those perky people who rose early, gloriied in the birth of a new day, and went through life with a chipper smile on her face.

The only one who had to be chivvied out of bed was Mai. Mai wasn't a bender, hadn't partaken in any of the other 'sacred dance rituals', and she most assuredly wasn't a chipper early riser. She was rather morose and in something of a foul mood after being drug away from good sleep in a real bed—something she'd missed enormously during her time in prison.

Iroh chose not to join the dancing, much preferring to watch from the covered walkway overlooking the beach while he enjoyed a nice cup of tea. Momo and Hedwig joined him.

Appa, poor guy, was hidden away in the courtyard so he wouldn't be seen. He took the opportunity to nibble on the hay and fruit that had been left out for him and catch up on his sleep. He'd been doing a lot of flying over the last several months, and felt he was due a nice long break.

The teens gathered on the beach beneath the spectacular rising sun, and began to dance as the first strains of music from the 'sprit world music box' drifted over them. Once around, twice around they completed the set. Halfway through the third run through the dance changed and they were swept away.

Other firebenders, already up and about in spite of the early hours, felt the call and drifted down towards the beach, not really understanding why but knowing it was important.

The original small circle tripled in size and the call spread wider. The non-benders on the island came out, hearing he music and the shouts of the people dancing, and they got swept up as well, and the call began travelling outwards, reaching all the small scattered islands that made up the Fire Nation, and across the ocean to the colonies.

In the heart of the Fire Nation, Fire Lord Ozai looked out over chaos and bedlam as the regimented rows of soldiers and citizens that had gathered about the palace to hear his latest decree splintered into a seething mass of dancing fools.

He could feel something pulling at him, but he resisted with all his might as he staggered back to his throne room.

He didn't know what it was—spirits or the avatar or saboteurs poisoning the drinking water—but he
refused to bow to its whims--he was Fire Lord Ozai!

They thought him beaten, they thought him broken, they thought they could destroy what he’d wrought and feast on his corpse. They were fools. He was the Phoenix King. He would rise from the ashes of these setbacks, greater and more powerful than ever before! He would burn the world and remake it in his image!

Once ensconced on his throne, surrounded by his own fire once more, he felt marginally more in control.

"Fools, cowards and traitors. Plotting against me. Everyone is plotting against me."

The flickering flames made the shadows dance on the walls. This was normal, but in Ozai’s feverish state of mind, he saw assassins in the dancing shadows. Rage burned through his veins like lava and he stood amidst the flames with a roar. Lightning flew from his hands and shattered part of the wall. The flare of the lightning’s passage made the shadows shift. Ozai roared again and again, flinging lighting at the elusive assassins, screaming imprecations against them and raving about his coming rebirth as the Phoenix king.

So distracted was he by the shadowy assassins in his mind, he never noticed the one creeping across the ceiling that dropped down behind him. The figure struck out with only its bare hands and hit him several times with precise, rapid strikes in a particular order. Ozai’s lighting fizzled at his fingertips and he began to tumble to the ground, his eyes wild and disbelieving as the flames that wreathed the platform died down around them.

What little sanity was left to him shattered when he saw the figure standing above him.

"YOU!"

"Hello, husband. Long time no see. How are our children, by the way?" Ursa hissed, her voice icy.

"I should have killed you! You birthed weaklings and traitorous monsters to destroy me! I should have killed you the moment you pushed that mewling weakling son into the world and been done with you!"

"Ozai, Ozai, you never learn, do you? The only one in this family weak or unworthy is you. If anyone should have killed anyone, I should have killed you the same night I ended your murderous father. The world would have been a better place without you. Instead, I chose to believe, foolishly it seems, that you would honor the one request I made of you, and see our children safe and well. I should have known better than to trust a man who would plot against his father and his brother, always looking only to his own gain. It ends here. Goodbye Ozai."

Ursa struck once more, little more than a gentle tap of her fingers to the Fire Lord’s throat and heart. He died in agony as his heart gave out, unable to move or scream. She didn’t bother to stay and watch him die. She fled back into the shadows and made her way stealthily from the palace complex. She only made it as far as the plaza outside. No longer having the singular focus to bring Ozai’s life to an end for threatening and injuring her children, she got swept up in the madness that had overtaken the whole nation. She felt a momentary pang of fear--her life would be forfeit should anyone discover what she’d done, but it seemed unimportant for the moment.

Her children were safe--let the gods decide her fate.

"Are they still out there?" Aang asked.
"Yeah. I'm sure they need time to process everything." Harry agreed.

Once the dance had wound down, Zuko and Azula had both gone off by themselves to brood. It was no easy thing to lose a parent, even if that parent had been a murderous psychopath--if anything, it probably made it worse, as it meant neither of them had a chance to confront him or find closure. They had simply felt his heart give out and knew he was gone forever.

That by itself was bad enough, but they'd also felt the scars Fire Nation had left on the land in their rush towards industrialization--everyone had. They had felt the polluted ground and waterways like a sickness in their souls. They'd also felt an echo of the ill-will borne towards their nation by the rest of the world for the atrocities they'd committed over the long hundred year war.

It had been a terrible moment, feeling the recoiling shock as the whole of Fire Nation's people, who had been far away from the war, and had comforted themselves through the loss of loved ones lost in it, realized that their great and noble cause was really an extended land grab by greedy nobles, however it might have started. It wasn't all bad--there was some hope in there. The war was over, and there would be no vengeful army landing on their shores. They had been able to find commonality with those elsewhere who had lost loved ones to the war--people like themselves, not alien others who needed to be destroyed.

Those loyal citizens who had been wrongfully accused of various accounts of treason and sedition were cleared and their good names restored, and however personally tragic to Zuko and Azula, the people of Fire Nation knew that their former Fire Lord, who had done everything in his power to expand his ancestors' war towards complete destruction, was gone, and a new Fire Lord had risen in his place.

It looked like Zuko was stuck with the job, seventeen and banished from the home country for years or not. Iroh had declined, and Azula had been too distraught over her father's sudden demise when there was so much left unsaid.

Young and inexperienced or not, Zuko had the people's hearts, and the will and desire to be not only Fire Lord, but a good Fire Lord.

There was other good news as well--Mai and Ty Lee had come within moments of losing their entire families. They were to be executed in their place--both as punishment for their 'treachery' and as bait to draw them out into the open. Having fled the mainland immediately upon their escape, and hiding out in the royal residence on Ember Island, they hadn't heard about any of it, so it had been both a tremendous shock as well as a tremendous relief to learn that they were alive and well and safe for the moment.

"How are you doing, Aang?" Harry asked.

"I'm not sure. For so long now, everyone has been telling me I needed to face and defeat the Fire Lord, and everyone seemed convinced it was going to be some huge, epic battle where I had to hunt him down and kill him. Having it all be over so suddenly…I'm mostly relieved, really…"

"But you're still unsettled because the whole big build-up to said epic battle just fizzled?"

"Yeah, pretty much, which is weird, because I didn't want to hunt him down and kill him."

"But part of you is still irked that your thunder was stolen?"

"That sounds really petty, when you put it that way."

"If it makes you feel any better, that's a perfectly human reaction. I'd put it aside though. Do you
really think these dances would have had the sort of impact they've had if not for you? You're the avatar, and that made all the difference. Remember Aang, your stated role is to keep the balance between nations, not to mete out personal vengeance against individuals. You've trained, traveled the world and made friends with people of all the nations, helped end the war and bring balance back. That you did it by dancing and not through an epic battle is immaterial--the end results speak for themselves."

"Yeah. I'm being silly, aren't I?"

"I wouldn't say you were being silly. All this stuff has been weighing on you for a while, and having it all over so suddenly is a shock, that's all. Once it really sinks in that it's over and you can get on with the rest of your life, you'll be fine."

"Thanks, Sifu Harry. You always seem to know just what to say to make me feel better."

"Glad I could help." Harry smiled at him, before nudging Tom who was sitting in front of him. "You're done. Do me now."

"Geez, bossy."

"I've been sitting here all burnt while covering you in burn cream. I don't want to hear it."

"I thought you made something to protect you from the sun." Toph asked curiously. "Why are you both all burnt again?"

"I did. It only lasts two hours though. We were out in the sun a lot longer than that, and not only had the sun beating down overhead all day, but reflecting back from the sand and the water. Just think how bad off we'd have been if I hadn't of made something to protect us." Harry grumbled while swathing the parts of himself he could reach in sunburn cream while Tom coated his back.

"Are you both going to be alright?" Sokka wondered.

"Yeah. We'll be fine once this stuff has a chance to work. Don't worry about it."

Harry slumped in place and let out a sigh of relief as the burn cream began drawing the heat and the sting out of his skin.

"You look funny. You're all orange." Aang laughed.

"We just need to leave it on long enough to work and then we can shower and get it off. It looks stupid while it's on, but it's very effective."

"That's the last of it." Tom announced.

"We're going to have to be careful not to get burnt again. I don't think I have all the ingredients to make more."

Zuko and Azula returned from their brooding vigil by the ocean.

"Are you two alright?" Ty Lee asked, as she flitted off the stairs to pounce on Azula. Mai followed and embraced Zuko, who wrapped his arms around her and pressed his face into her hair. Tom noted that Toph had grabbed Katara by the arm to keep her from leaping out to pounce on Zuko. She was currently watching Mai and Zuko's embrace with visible affront and disbelief.
"We will be. It was all so sudden and..." Zuko trailed off.

"And he was your father." Mai finished quietly.

"Yeah." Zuko agreed.

He seemed to be handling things better than Azula, but then he hadn't seen the man in years, and had resigned himself to the fact that his father loved power more than he loved all of them months ago.

"We need to return to the capital. Things are going to be unsettled there with the way everything happened so suddenly." Zuko realized.

"Appa's been resting all week. We can leave whenever you want."

"I'd like to leave as soon as everyone's ready, if it's alright."

Iroh sighed and climbed stiffly to his feet.

"At least there's the promise of a soft bed at the end of our journey. These old bones aren't used to dancing all day."

No one had any problem with leaving immediately, so they set out to gather their things.

"There's a lot more of us than there were before. I think I should break out the carpet again. Even with the saddle significantly lightening the load, it wasn't really meant to hold so many people."

Harry offered.

"Yeah, I guess we should split into groups."

"Why don't you take Zuko, Azula, Mai and Ty Lee. I'll take the others."

"If I'm taking the rest of the Fire Nation folks, shouldn't Iroh come with me?"

"Iroh's old, and stiff and just got out of prison a few days ago, and he was injured most of the time he was in there. Then, on top of that, he's been leaping and whirling and dancing all day. My tent has a bed, the means to make tea, and also a bathroom. I think he'd really prefer to ride with me."

"Put that way, yeah, he probably would." Aang agreed.

"You should probably shave your head and put on your fancy robes before we leave."

"Huh. I got so used to randomly having hair, I actually forgot for a while there."

The capitol was still stirring like a knocked over beehive when they arrived two hours later. People were thronging the streets, and didn't seem to know what to do with themselves. There were a lot of witnesses to the arrival of Appa, and word spread like wildfire through the city that the great beast bore not only the Avatar, but the crown Princess, the Dragon of the West, General Iroh, as well as Fire Lord Zuko.

General Iroh got the guards organized to spread the word, and to disperse the crowds rampaging through the streets. Zuko got the palace staff organized to see to rooms for everyone, and ordered word to be spread that he would be meeting with whatever ministers and advisers were available in the morning. Toph, Harry and Tom fixed the lightning damage in the throne room.
Azula found out where her father's body was being held. She uncovered his face and stared at him for a long time. His eyes were wide and mad and furious, and his face twisted into a snarl of hatred. He didn't look at all like the all-powerful, always in control figure of her dreams and nightmares. She backed up until her back hit the wall, and slid down it till she was collapsed in a heap on the floor. That's when she started crying so hard it hurt.

She had loved him and hated him, feared him and admired him. She'd spent her whole life trying so hard to be whatever daddy wanted, she really had no idea who she really was.

Ty Lee found her there an hour later, and held her till she stopped shaking.

When order had been mostly restored, a fearful maid approached Zuko and Mai with a baby in tow.

"Tom Tom!" Mai exclaimed in shock and relief. Her little brother had grown quite a bit since she'd seen him last and had several more teeth. He held out his arms for her. Mai took him with tears in her eyes.

"What's he doing here? Are my parents here?"

"The former Fire Lord…took him." the maid whispered, while casting nervous glances at Zuko.

"What do you mean he took him?" Zuko asked.

"The child's parents were to be executed. He planned to make him watch. There was a rumor that he planned to name him his heir afterwards, should he prove to be a strong firebender." she whispered.

"You did well to bring him to me. We'll see he's returned to his parents." Zuko sighed, feeling sick.

The maid nodded, while nearly collapsing in relief, and hurried off.

"I'm going to see if I can find my parents. I'm sure they're scared to death and probably worried sick."

Zuko nodded, looking a bit lost himself.

Mai stepped closer and drew his face down for a kiss. When they parted, she stroked his cheek softly and smiled at him.

"Don't worry about getting everything sorted out tonight. Get some sleep. I'll be back in the morning. We'll get through this."

Tom-Tom squealed and broke the mood. Zuko snorted in amusement and rubbed the kid's head. Mai found herself smiling as well, even though her brother's cute baby antics usually annoyed her. All that time in prison worrying over his fate had given her some perspective on things.

Zuko found his feet taking him towards the royal apartments. He was all muddled up inside. So much had happened that day. He still couldn't quite wrap his mind around all of it. He spotted Ty Lee standing just inside the doorway leading to the royal family wing, smiling and looking pleased as anything.

"Ty Lee?"
"Zuko! Isn't it wonderful? Look who's here!" Ty Lee squealed, before running towards him to drag him the rest of the way. As they turned the corner, Zuko stopped dead, unable to believe what his eyes were showing him.

"Mom?"

Ursa pulled back slightly from Azula, who looked as shocked as he did, and turned to face him. She smiled and held out an arm, while leaving the other wrapped around his sister.

"Mom." he repeated, too choked up to say anything more. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around both of them, more happy than he could remember being in years.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

A few loose ends are tied up, Harry and Tom head home...or try to.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I can't believe how the time flew by. It really doesn't seem like I've been here nearly a year already." Harry mused.

"No, it doesn't." Tom agreed.

"Do you think those wards we put up to keep people from wanting to settle onto those peninsulas will work?"

"I hope so, otherwise that was a lot of exhausting work for nothing. It took us weeks to fly the coastline and lay those aversion wards. Look at it this way though, in the time we're likely to be gone, if anyone does set up there, it won't be many and they shouldn't be too well entrenched by the time we return. When wizards appear on all sides of them, complete with homes and villages, they'll likely be so freaked out they'll leave in a hurry. It'll be fine."

"I hope so. No one better try moving into the valley I picked."

"That valley is in the very heart of the peninsula. If anyone does set up there, they're more likely to settle on the coast first. Stop worrying about it."

"I wish we'd gotten to stay a bit longer with guru Pathik."

"It couldn't be helped. You said it yourself, the anniversary of your arrival was fast approaching. We have other things to worry about. Besides, if you're really so keen to be enlightened, you can work on it on your own, or just find time to go back and visit that guru after we return."

"Yeah, I guess. Did you find it at all worthwhile?"

Tom didn't answer right away.

"I had a lot of nightmares. I think all that stuff from my past is probably best left undisturbed."

"Maybe, or maybe it needs to be worked through so it's not all just laying down deep in your psyche like a mass of toxic ooze, ready to strike."

"Toxic ooze. Yes, that really makes me feel so much better." Tom snarked. "What about yourself?"

"Unpleasant, like you said, but I think it's worth doing. I have about half my chakras cleared. I really think it's worth completing."

"I haven't even gotten past the first one. So much of Voldemort is tied up in fear and survival."

"You have to let go of your phobia about death sooner or later. I think you'll be happier for it."
"Mmm." Tom replied, his voice non-committal.

"Hey guys, we're almost there." Aang called back over his shoulder.

Tom shivered a bit in the cold. "I really hope the transfiguration on this thing holds until we're out of here. I don't fancy turning into an ice-cube." Tom was currently wrapped up in a fur lined cloak that had been transfigured out of one of the blankets in Harry's tent.

"They've done things a bit differently. I wonder if they're planning to build an ice city like they have at the North Pole."

"What used to be here?"

"See the igloos and the tents back there behind the new construction? That was the village when we were here before. There were only about a dozen people here. They had been raided for years and lost all their waterbenders, then all the men went off to fight the Fire Nation. All that was left here was a dozen women, a handful of small children, and Sokka and Katara."

Where the village used to stand there was a large ice structure, and what looked to be the foundations of more rooms with connecting hallways that had yet to be constructed. From the look of it, there were monumental walls in the making as well, though at the moment they were just demarcated, much as the outlines of the city were.

"Don't land near the new construction. If any of it gets knocked over or smeared, you won't be making any friends here. Head for the igloos." Harry suggested.

"I can't believe I'm in the South Pole. I'm going to be less than useless and blind as a bat the whole time I'm here. Why did I let you guys talk me into this again?" Toph complained.

"You wanted to be there when we left and say goodbye." Tom reminded her.

"Yeah, well, I was an idiot."

"It'll be fine, Toph. I doubt you and Aang will be sticking around for too long." Harry added.

"I hope not. I'm already tired of these stupid boots I got stuffed into."

Naturally, the whole village turned out to greet them. There were a lot more people there than had been the last time he'd come to the village, but fewer than he'd been expecting.

"Where's everyone else?" Harry wondered.

"About half the tribe's men are up north negotiating for brides to bring home with them. " Sokka explained.

"Wow. Your little village is going to be huge, isn't it?"

"Huger by far than any of us are used to. It should be nice though, having he place jumping again." Katara agreed.

"Hey, Suki, you're here too! Moving in, are we?" Harry noted.

Suki blushed and slanted a look at Sokka before replying. "We're negotiating."

Toph's hand tightened for a moment where it rested in the crook of Harry's elbow, though she gave no other outward sign that she was at all upset by the news.
"Good luck with that." she said cheerfully.

Harry laid a hand over hers in commiseration, but that was all--she wouldn't appreciate attention being drawn to her disappointment.

"Hey, Aang, buddy, you've been a bit quiet over there. What've you been up to lately?" Sokka asked.

"Toph and I were flying around different places and checking up on things, and then we spent some time at the Eastern Air Temple. I completed my avatar training with Guru Pathik."

"So you're a full-fledged by-golly avatar now?"

"Looks like."

"Well, good for you. You've come a long way from the little pipsqueak we dug out of the iceberg. You should be proud."

"Thank you."

"What sort of training was it?" Katara asked curiously.

"I cleared my chakras."

"Oh. That's…good?"

"It is good. I can call up my avatar state at will, and remain in control. Any time before it just sort of roared up and swept me away. That won't happen anymore." Aang explained.

"Well, congratulations."

"I don't want to cut the reunion short, but we should probably head out. It's getting close to the anniversary of when I arrived here. I don't know if it will make a difference to our return, but better safe than sorry." Harry interjected.

"Yeah, I guess we should get on that." Tom agreed.

"I hope I can find the spot I came in from again."

Hedwig barked and pointed with one of her wings from her perch on Harry's shoulder.

"Really? You can sense a bit of leftover energy there? Neat. Do you have any other abilities you've never mentioned?"

Hedwig barked again and puffed her chest out.

"Well, you're just full of surprises, aren't you?"

The whole group loaded up on Appa, and flew out to the middle of the icy plain where Harry's portal had let him out, and said their goodbyes. Though they were expecting something of the sort, they were still rather taken aback by the glowing portal that formed in mid-air.

"Don't worry. Before you know it, we'll be back. This isn't goodbye, it's see you later."

Two boys and one owl stepped through, and the portal vanished, leaving only silence and the
blowing wind.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, so ends book 3. For those of you who are interested, the next story chronologically is "A tale of two Harrys" after that begins book 4, which picks up about where book 2 ended, since Harry traveled through both time and dimensions to go on his adventure.
As always, your comments and kudos are appreciated. Thank you.

Book 4 should start getting posted any day now, so keep an eye out. Hope to see you there.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!