"Li" can't remember his name or anything before waking up alone and injured in the ghost town. He can only hope to find the answers he craves in Ba Sing Se. Too bad the spirits enjoy toying with his life and sanity.

**Chapter 78 summary:** In which Tengfei is seriously beginning to reconsider his sanity while his ability to be surprised seems to have increased. How unfortunate.
The first thing he noticed was the silence, the second was the searing pain in his chest. It felt like someone had taken a torch and held it over his heart. It burned and took his breath away. A pathetic whimper reached his ears and his cheeks burned when he recognized his own voice.

Rolling onto his side, he curled up around the wound only for his head to pound viciously. His stomach rebelled and he threw up, coughing when the spasm stung his chest making it difficult to breathe.

When he opened his eyes again, it was brighter and the pain in his chest had subsided somewhat. However, his head throbbed to the beat of his pulse and his cool vomit was disgustingly close to his face. If he kept smelling it, he might just throw up again.

Carefully, he eased himself up to his hands and knees, pausing when his vision tunneled. When the dizziness receded as much as he suspected it was going to, he pushed himself to his feet. Almost immediately, he lost his balance and flailed out with his arms. His hands crashed against something solid and sturdy, a wall he realized. He was inside a building. But what building? Where?

Taking a deep breath, he stumbled towards the light and sighed in relief. Sunlight. This was sunlight. He couldn't stop the heavy sigh of relief. His head tilted up and his back slumped against the wall so he could bathe in the warm, living light.

This... He needed this. Sunlight.

In that moment, sunlight was all he could ever want, all he could ever need. He could already feel his wobbly legs regain some of their steadiness. Unfortunately, the pain in his chest and the throbbing in his head refused to go away. His vision was still blurred and his balance was entirely untrustworthy. If the wall pressed against his back twitched even the slightest bit, he knew he would hit the ground again. He would have preferred if the sheath holding his dao didn't press against his spine like that, though.

He didn't know how long he stood there on shaking legs basking in sunlight, but something soft and insistent nudged him back to reality. Stunned, he blinked and was greeted by the large, black feathered face of an ostrich-horse.

Instinctively, he reached out and clumsily took hold of the dangling reins. With a deep, steadying breath, he pushed himself away from the wall and into the soft feathers. The ostrich-horse made a cooing sound and tucked her -her?- head against his back, nudging him towards her flank.

It took more effort to take two steps forward than he was willing to admit even with the hen's gentle encouragement. His chest burned when he struggled to mount the ostrich-horse. It took three tries and a helpful nudge from the hen's beak to make sure he made it onto the ostrich-horse's back and stayed there.

He needed to leave. This place wasn't safe. He had to leave. He had to get out.

But where should he go? How would he get there? He didn't know where he was so even if he did have a destination in mind, he wouldn't know how to get there from here. Wherever here is.
So tired.

His knuckles tightened on the reins when the ostrich-horse lurched forward with a squawk. Where was she going? Did it even matter? So long as it was away from here, he was fine with it.

Water.

He groaned when the motion disagreed with his abused body. Leaning down, he rested his forehead against the back of the hen's feathered neck and focused on breathing. In, hold, out. In, hold, out.

The sunlight bared down on his back, seeping into his skin and depleted chi through his clothes. It was a soothing lullaby to his exhausted mind.

So tired.

Abruptly, he sat up, and promptly leaned over the side and threw up again. Wrong. This was so wrong. He couldn't sleep. He just... Something told him that if he closed his eyes, he wouldn't open them again.

So he forced himself to stay awake and breathe. In, hold, out. In, hold, out.

He really should do something about the wound on his chest. Clean it or something so it didn't get infected. In, hold, out. It was really hard to keep his thoughts straight. In, hold, out. He winced when his mount shifted causing something to dig into his hip. Clumsy fingers worked the offending object out of his belt and held it up so he could see it. In, hold, out. A knife. Simple but familiar. In, hold, out. Curious, he pulled the blade out of its sheath and tried to make out the blurry words etched on it.

Made in Earth Kingdom.

Well that was informative. Utterly useless.

In, hold, out. Tucking the sheathed blade back into his belt, he held onto the ostrich-horse's reins and breathed. The creature knew what it wanted. She'd get there one way or another. He just had to keep breathing to be sure he was alive when she got there.

The sun moved slowly. He could feel it dropping lower and lower in the sky. His own body followed the sun's example, slumping so the barest hints of feathers tickled his face.

In, hold, out.

Sound, muddled and unclear, pulled him back from his daze. He wasn't moving. When did he stop moving?

"Oh... -er me? Son. Son!"

He grunted when his body jerked, upsetting his wound. Confused, he lifted his head and blinked dumbly at the hand gripping his arm. Whose...?

"Son, can you hear me?"

In, hold, out.

His eyes followed the arm to a face he didn't recognize. He should answer that.
"What happened to you?" the stranger murmured.

He really should answer. But he didn't know what to say. What happened. What-

"I...I don't know," he said.

"Come on down from there," the stranger said, gently tugging his arm. "You look like you'll keel over dead. What's your name, son?"

He shook his head slowly. "I... I don't know," he whispered. When his mind caught up to what he'd said, he felt his eyes widen in dawning horror. "I don't know," he whimpered. "Oh Agni."

Sunset.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This will be a Zuko-centric AU as of the episode "The Chase." Zuko did show up to fight Azula with the Avatar in the ghost town, but he didn't reunite with Uncle Iroh. Instead of being blasted out of the house by Azula and found by Iroh, the wall held and Zuko was knocked out cold inside the house. He and Iroh literally missed each other.

I will do my best to update this promptly, but I do work and the semester has started again and real life trumps, unfortunately.
"Li"

Chapter Summary

In which Than and Ying try to get to know the newest addition to their little group.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Than and Ying are canon characters encountered peripherally by Zuko in 'Zuko Alone' as well as directly by Team Avatar in 'The Serpant's Pass.'

Than pressed a freshly cleaned rag to the boy's chest. He could count on one hand the number of things that could cause such a wound. Pity the number of people who could do it could fill an entire army. Literally.

"How is he?"

He shook his head and lifted his gaze to his beloved wife's dark brown eyes. "If he doesn't wake up on his own soon, I'll try to wake him myself. You never know with concussions," he said. "To be honest, I'm surprised he made it this long without care. He has a strong will."

Ying pushed herself further up against the tree she sat under and patted her lap. "Bring him here," she said gently. "I want to see."

"It's not pretty," Than said grimly. When Ying pursed her lips and patted her lap again, Than sighed. Shaking his brown bangs from his face, he carefully scooped up the boy's body and carried him over to his wife.

Ying guided the boy's head down so it nestled limply on her lap. When she saw the burn, she winced in sympathy. The chest wound had clearly been made by a controlled blast of fire. Even though the boy's clothes had acted as a buffer, Ying doubted even a waterbender could heal the burn without leaving a scar. At least it wouldn't be as bad or as noticeable as the scar marring the boy's face.

She trailed her fingertips along the older scar and sighed heavily. "What happened to you?" she murmured.

"He must have found himself on the wrong side of a firebender's fist," Than muttered, wringing the excess water from the cloth before dabbing the wound once more. "At least it's not bleeding much anymore. The fire must've cauterized some of it. Not that it did much different for his ribs." He shook his head. "Ying, the sheer force of this attack, it... He's got at least two cracked ribs that I can feel."

Ying pressed her lips together and began brushing strands of black, sweat-soaked hair aside from the boy's sleeping face. "Oma and Shu have mercy," she prayed.
Her husband squeezed her shoulder comfortingly before returning his attention to tending the fresh burn. It broke Ying's heart that even children were suffering in this war. It wasn't fair for such a young boy to know pain like their surprise guest did.

A low crooning sound and the soft tickle of feathers against her side startled her from her thoughts. Both Ying and Than blinked at the boy's ostrich-horse which it settled down next to Ying, tucking its head into a small wing. Most ostrich-horses were rather bad tempered, but this one seemed comfortable with strangers. Either that, or it was worried about its rider too. Smiling, Ying scratched the creature's head with her free hand.

"Why don't you get some sleep," Than said. "We'll have a long walk tomorrow. We'll need to be rested before attempting to cross the Si Wong Desert tomorrow."

"We both need to be rested," Ying corrected with a smile. "I'll be fine. The baby's not due for another week or two yet. Besides," her smile faded, "someone needs to wake him regularly tonight. If he stays asleep, he may not wake."

"Without knowing how serious the concussion is, I agree." Than heaved a sigh and scratched his head wearily. "I'll do it. I need to keep an eye on the fire anyway."

Ying gave him a look. "You need to sleep sometime, dear," she scolded.

"I will, I will," he said, patting his wife's arm. "After I bind that wound."

Sunrise.

He wasn't sure how he knew, he just did. He knew it was sunrise without having to open his eyes. Too bad he opened them anyway. Something large, round, and green filled his vision. Curious, he tugged his arm up and poked the thing.

"Oh!"

Startled, he scrambled back from the thing, regretting the abrupt motion when his chest stung sharply. Grunting in pain, he clapped a hand over his chest and stared at the woman whose lap his head at been resting on. What the-?

"Goodness gracious," the young woman said.

She pushed herself upright so she could see over her very pregnant belly. It must have been her belly he'd poked. His cheeks flamed in mortification.

"Are you alright?" she asked, her soft brown eyes filled with sleepy worry.

"Who-?" He stopped when he noticed the woman's gaze flicker briefly to something behind him. Before he could react, a gentle hand pressed between his shoulder blades.

"Not so fast, son."

"You look like you'll keel over dead."

He turned around to see a man kneeling by a dying fire. Eyes a few shades darker than the woman’s sparkled with worry, but the smile on his face was both warm and genuine. "You had a rough night last night," the man said. "You had a concussion so I had to wake you every so often."
He chuckled. "You don't wake up very gracefully, you know."

This time even the woman laughed. Warmth bloomed in his cheeks despite his confusion. Thankfully, the man took pity on him.

"I'm Than and this is my wife Ying," he said, gesturing to the pregnant woman who smiled and waved. "Your ostrich-horse brought you here last night. Do you remember?"

He nodded.

"Good," Than said in relief. "Now, I'm going to ask you a few questions, if that's alright."

He nodded warily.

Than sighed. "Do you remember your name?" he asked.

He opened his mouth to speak but the words left him, slipping away like water between his fingers. He frantically dug through his mind for a name, a memory, something, anything!

"Easy, easy," Than said. Strong hands gripped his shoulders and held him firmly but gently in place. "Calm down," he said, keeping his tone steady and reassuring. "It's okay. It's okay."

No. No it's not okay. He couldn't remember. He couldn't remember! Why? Why couldn't he remember his own name? It was who he was. It was everything! How could he exist without a name? How could he ever forget his own name?!

He was getting dizzy and he couldn't get enough air. He couldn't get enough air. Why couldn't he get enough air?! He couldn't breathe!

He was so lost in his own frantic mind, that he barely noticed when Than released him and backed away. Smaller hands, calloused from work but gentle as any mother's wrapped around him and pulled him into an embrace.

"Shh, shh. Not so fast, now," Ying murmured, tugging the boy's head down so it rested on her chest. "Deep breaths. In, and out. Come on, I'll do it with you. In, and out. In, and out. There you go. That's better."

Breathe. He could breathe. Maybe. In and out, she said. His mind latched onto Ying's voice, focusing on her soft commands. He tried to follow her lead, stumbling over the first few attempts. In and out. In, and out. In, and out. No. No, that wasn't right. He had to... Close but not... In, and out. No. In, hold, out. Yes. Yes, that was it. In, hold, out. In, hold, out.

Slowly, he clawed his way back to reality. Ying held him like a mother, one hand holding his head, her fingers teasing his hair. The other squeezed his shoulder, her thumb rubbing soothing circles into his tense muscles. She kept whispering encouragements to him, praising him when he took a deep breath and calming him when his mind threatened to crack once more.

"I know it's scary," Ying murmured. "I can't imagine what you must be feeling right now. Just know that, no matter what, you're welcome to stay with us for as long as you want to."

She pressed a kiss to his forehead and it took everything he had not to sob. Familiar. That was so familiar, but so far...

A shadow fell over them and he flinched, bringing a flood of more soothing words from Ying. A large hand began rubbing his back, up and down along his spine. Than.
"We're going to Ba Sing Se," Than said, settling next to the boy's still shivering form. "We'll be safe there. All of us." His hand moved up to grip the boy's neck, massaging the tense muscles there. "You too, if you want to. We could be a regular family of four."

Than had seen much in his thirty-two years of life. Some of it worth remembering, some not. But when those two pale gold eyes gazed at him with such a lost, open expression, Than knew in his heart that he would never be able to forget it.

The Fire Nation burned his village, took away his livelihood, and left him and his beloved wife adrift. They barely had enough coin between them to make it to Ba Sing Se, let alone set them up comfortably. But bridges were made to be crossed after they were reached, not before.

Right now, Than focused on making sure his wife was comfortable and Li didn't overwork himself in this desert heat. Ying sat on the back of the ostrich-horse, clutching the reins with both hands, while Li trudged at her side with one hand on the creature's flank, gently guiding it.

Li. When Ying suggested the name, Than had been certain the boy would reject it. Yet the boy had acquiesced without much of a fight. Li, a common name for such an uncommon boy.

Li didn't speak often, understandably so, but he wasn't silent either. He murmured to the ostrich-horse sometimes and even asked questions on occasion. Otherwise, he seemed content to just listen to Than and Ying talk.

"Are you sure you don't need to rest, Li?" Than asked. "There's no shame in that, you know."

Li winced like he'd eaten something sour. "I'm fine," he muttered, deliberately not touching his bandaged chest.

"Well, I need to stop," Ying said, patting her belly. "I love this child, but I would prefer it if they didn't insist on pressing my bladder."

The bright red that bloomed in Li’s cheeks pulled a chuckle from the mother-to-be. Honestly, this boy was so easily flustered.

"Than, help me down, please," Ying said, holding out her hands. "No, Li," she admonished gently when the boy stepped up to help her instead. "Why don't you go sit down in the shade over there so Than can check your bandages," she said.

"But-"

"Don't worry," Than said. "You're not holding us up. It's probably best we stop now anyway. If we wait for another hour or so, it should cool down a bit. If you want to be useful, you can give this good girl a drink of water," he added, patting the ostrich-horse.

Li hesitated with a frown, fingering his straw hat awkwardly before nodding. Taking the ostrich-horse's reins in hand, he moved into the shade of a low sand dune and sat down. The hen clucked and fluffed her feathers when she reached the shade.

"I get the feeling he's not used to taking orders," Than said, helping his wife squat down to relieve herself without ruining her clothes.

"Neither were you when we met," she said, a twinkle in her eye. "Young men are like that. He
didn't have to let me ride, Than. In a way, I wish he hadn't. That wound-

"It's not as bad as it looks, thank Oma and Shu," Than said. "Though I'd wager it hurts more than he lets on. It's the ribs I'm worried about."

Ying clicked her tongue, straightening with her husband's help. "Men."

Than laughed but his smile faded quickly. "The burn on his face..." He shook his head in mild horror. "I can only imagine the things he's seen. Since when did the Fire Nation field children in their armies?"

"Never that I've seen," Ying said, giving her husband an odd look. "Why?" She followed her husband's gaze to Li waiting for them in the shade and grimaced. "No. He's so young!"

"He may not be military," Than allowed cautiously. "He could be a colonial. But he is Fire Nation."

"You don't know that," Ying insisted.

"The eyes."

"What, you mean his scar? Than, you know-"

"Not his scar, his eyes. Only the Fire Nation has gold eyes," Than said grimly. "Pale gold?" He shook his head.

"He could be mixed blood," Ying said firmly.

"He could be and if it was just the eyes, then I wouldn't second guess it. But it's not just the eyes." He bit his lip and sighed. "Ying, he swore by Agni. You and I both know only the Fire Nation prays to Agni these days."

Ying sighed, her eyes closing wearily. "He's just a boy," she said finally, "and he's done us no harm. I can't in good conscience send him away. Even if, by some curse, he is military, I couldn't do it."

"He certainly doesn't look it," Than agreed. "He looks half-starved."

"I can't leave him to some unknown fate without making sure he's well enough to take care of himself," Ying said, nodding. "Call it an overdeveloped mother instinct, if you'd like," she said, tapping her husband's nose with her finger. "He needs someone right now. If we can help him, if we can show him that someone in this world cares, then we should. Besides," she added with a small smile, taking Than's hand and pressing it to her stomach, "it could be good practice."

Than smiled despite himself and kissed his wife. She was right. He had no way of knowing Li's lineage or background but his personality spoke volumes. Li didn't have to insist Ying ride the ostrich-horse, yet he had. He didn't have to stay with them, yet he had. Li could have taken all of their belongings and left on his ostrich-horse at any time and they wouldn't have been able to catch him. Yet he hadn't. Even now, Li sat obediently by the feathered mount holding a small wooden bowl of water for the hen to drink from and waiting for Ying and Than to return.

Of course, Li could be waiting until he'd milked their generosity for all it was worth before leaving, but Than couldn't bring himself to believe that. Li's breakdown earlier this morning nearly broke his heart to watch. Li's eyes may be gold, but they weren't cruel; wary and suspicious, but not cruel.
"Thank you for waiting," Ying said, easing herself down next to Li.

Than knelt in front of Li and smiled. "Could I see your chest, please?" he asked.

Li grimaced, glancing nervously at Ying before reluctantly undoing the frog buttons of his brown tunic. Dark red blossomed through the bandages, but it wasn't anywhere near as bad as it had been that morning. Than carefully pulled the cloth away from the burn, wincing when skin stuck to it. Interestingly, Li gave no indication of pain until one particular scab peeled free with a bandage.

"Sorry," Than said, easing the bandage back in place. "We'll need to clean these and rewrap when we stop for the night."

"We shouldn't go any further today," Li said.

Startled, Than blinked and lifted his gaze to Li's pale gold. "Why not? There's plenty of sunlight left."

"Too much," Li said, tilting his hat back so he could stare at the cloudless, blue sky. "We should travel at night when it's cooler and rest during the day. We'll make more headway if we do that. Besides, it'll be easier to hunt for food at night."

"O-oh. I see." Than considered the advice. "How do you know that?" he asked.

Li's mouth opened, then snapped shut. Golden eyes flashed briefly with the same fear that clouded them this morning before Li took a deep breath, swallowed, and looked away. Well, that answered that. Than felt like an idiot.

"If it can get us out of this heat, then it's worth a try," Ying said, patting Li's hand.

"I'll take first watch," Li said, tucking his hands into his tattered brown sleeves and settling into a comfortable position.

"Nonsense," Than said, waving Li's offer aside. "You're wounded. You need your rest to heal. I'm perfectly capable of keeping an eye out."

"I can do this," Li argued. "I won't be able to get much sleep anyway."

"Then rest your eyes," Than insisted. "Believe it or not, I do know what I'm doing sometimes." He winked at Li, amused by the befuddled expression on the boy's face.

"Often," Ying said.

Well, with encouragement like that, how could Than possibly fail in his duties?
Chapter Summary

In which Li saves a life, returns something, and gets more than he may be able to handle in return.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I've listed some of the links to my sources regarding kitsune, the Knowledge Seekers of Wan Shi Tong, the map of the A:tLA world that I'll be using for this fic, and the sound of fox calls below:


A:tLA world map - https://c1.staticflickr.com/9/8351/8306408148_056c8149c4_o.jpg

Fox Calls - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6NuhlibHsM

Li had been right, no surprise. Crossing the desert at night was much easier on all of them. Well, on himself and Ying at least. Li was struggling. It seemed the boy wasn’t much of a night cat-owl. The first part of the night was hardly a problem, but Li obviously had trouble staying awake past midnight. Although he always perked up a few minutes before dawn when the sky finally began to lighten.

Except for last night. For some reason Li was wide awake all night and jittery as a rat-dog. The boy would jump and reach for his dao blades at the slightest sound. He wouldn’t even let their little group stop to rest. Also, when Li thought no one was looking, his pale gold eyes would stay fixed on something on the eastern horizon. At one point, when the moon was at its zenith, Than thought he caught what appeared to be a flicker off of something towering out of the sand not too far away. Perhaps that was what bothered Li.

Well, if it was indeed the cause of the boy’s nervousness, then perhaps it was best to avoid the place, even if that thing was no longer visible. Li had a good head on his shoulders and was careful in everything he did and said. Based on his personal experience, Than expected more action and reaction from a child of the Fire Nation; not the thoughtful wariness Li exhibited. Granted, the boy was still a teenager with all the stubbornness, irritability, and impulsiveness that came with it. But there was a caution in everything he did and said that came from a lifetime of unpleasant experiences.

Whether Li remembered those experiences or not.

They were almost halfway through their third night trekking across the Si Wong Desert. Hopefully,
tomorrow would be their last night here before they reached the mountains. Then another day or so of hard travel and they would make it to Full Moon Bay and the secret ferry waystation to Ba Sing Se.

Just when his heart was beginning to lighten with hope, the most spirit-awful scream filled the calm night air. The sound spooked the ostrich-horse, nearly causing it to buck his wife Ying off its back. Than had to catch his wife when she couldn’t keep a strong enough hold on the ostrich-horse’s feathers to stay on its back. Li grabbed the creature’s reins, planted his feet as firmly as he could in the sand, and held on.

The sound came again and the ostrich-horse bucked and shook its head in an attempt to free itself from Li’s grasp. Than pulled Ying fully off the terrified beast and dragged her away, placing himself between his wife and the ostrich-horse. Li remained where he was, commanding the ostrich-horse to calm down and stay still! There were a few more, less savory words mixed in there. Than blinked. If he didn’t know better, he would have sworn up and down that Li had been raised on a ship.

A buzzing from above distracted Than from his thoughts and he looked up. Buzzard-hornets flew overhead towards the sound. Ahead on the right was a large outcropping of rock with what appeared to be a flat surface. Black dots moved away from the outcrop through the moonlit sky and began circling above point above the desert. More buzzard-hornets?

“We need to get out of here now,” Li said through gritted teeth.

“Right,” Than agreed. “We’ll go on foot.”

The sound came again and this time the ostrich-horse didn’t buck or try frantically to escape, but it did quiver hard enough for Than to hear the hiss of its feathers fluffing.

“What, by Oma and Shu, is that sound?” Ying cried, pressing close to her husband and wrapping an arm around her belly.

“I don’t know,” Than said.

Li’s golden eyes flickered to them briefly before turning towards the origin of the sound.

“Li?” Ying asked. “Do you know what that is?”

Li said nothing, but his brows drew low over his eyes in a grim frown. He shifted his grip on the ostrich-horse’s reins before abruptly pushing them into Than’s hands.

“I have to go,” he said so quickly he practically stumbled over his words. “Keep going north. I’ll find you. Don’t follow me.”

“Wait,” Than gasped. “Wait, Li! Li!”

“Come back!” Ying cried.

The boy ignored them and raced through the sand towards the origin of the eerie screams and where the buzzard-hornets circled.

He knew that alarming sound. It was an urgent and desperate cry for help from a creature he could
not quite name. But he knew it. He knew it like he knew he had to help it. His ribs ached with every jolting step on the sand, but it hurt worse to ignore that cry. His mother would have punished him severely if she’d ever found out he’d heard that cry and ignored it.

Mother?

Just as quickly as the thought came to him, it was gone like a slimy badger-frog. Growling in frustration, he continued running. Buzzard-hornets circled far above his head, but some were beginning to move lower, and a few daring ones had even begun attacking the poor creature struggling in the sand.

He drew his dao and sliced through the first buzzard-hornet to get too close and swung at another. The ugly thing backed off but one of its companions darted towards Li and got a mouthful of steel. Instinctively, he knew he wasn’t in the best state to fight yet. His ribs were still healing and his breath was still harsh and not as even as he would have preferred. But something told him that he’d fought harder battles before in worse conditions.

Against who? When? Where? Why?

None of those questions would be answered by buzzard-hornets, but he could certainly take his frustration out on them. Fighting like this was almost comforting in its familiarity. Fighting was something he did often and he was good at it. He knew it.

The buzzard-hornets seemed to figure it out too after Li managed to kill one too many of their swarm and began retreating. Li followed the creatures with his eyes as they flew back to the lone, stone butte towering over the desert. That must be the buzzard-hornets’ hive. He should probably get back to Than and make sure they stayed clear of it.

But first, he lowered his dao and turned to the pathetic creature that, until moments ago, had been the unfortunate center of attention. It was young and small with fur like ash on rusted metal, dark red legs, black paws, gray-black ears, and two bushy tails tipped with white. One of its legs was swollen, probably from a buzzard-hornet stinger. It was panting and scratching at the sand with its three good paws as if trying to dig something out.

Slowly, making sure the little creature saw his every move, Li knelt and set his dao on the ground. The hairs were standing on the back of Li’s neck and he felt twitchy all over just like last night. Could it be…

He reached out and brushed a hand over the kitsune’s injured back… leg.

Kitsune.

Fox spirit.

How…?

He swallowed back his annoyance when nothing else surfaced from his memories. At least he had a name for the little ball of fluff. That was a start. Not that it meant much to him out of context, but better to have something rather than nothing.

Kitsune.

Kitsune with sharp, pointy teeth!

He hissed, yanking his injured hand back when the kitsune snapped at him. He couldn’t really
blame the poor thing. He tended to snap too when he was hurting. At least he could speak.

Unfortunately, he still had to make sure the little fox spirit would be okay. He couldn’t just leave it, em, her out in the open like this. That was just asking for those buzzard-hornets to come back. Or worse, humans.

Sighing, Li sat back and stared at the creature thoughtfully. Eventually, the kitsune dismissed him and began pawing at the sand again. What was it doing? Curious, Li leaned forward, pausing when the kitsune’s ears flipped to him. He swallowed and leaned further, reaching out to sweep aside some of the sand further away from the kitsune’s nose.

The fox spirit stilled, ears flipped forward, and its closed eyes studying Li attentively. Why were its eyes closed? Was the spirit blind or was that normal? Either way, the spirit wasn’t attacking him so Li took that as a sign he was allowed to continue brushing the sand.

However, when his fingers brushed something smooth and most definitely not sand, he hesitated. Pulling the item out of the sand, Li was intrigued to see it was a small, white orb no larger than a children’s marble. It seemed to glow in the moonlight, but that was most likely due to the smooth, silvery sheen. If this was real, it would fetch quite a price at the ow!

Jerking his hand away from the kitsune’s sharp teeth, Li stumbled back, clutching the orb to his chest. The kitsune barked at him sharply and whined, snapping and struggling after him. What was going on? Why was…

He moved the hand holding the orb to the right, the kitsune followed it with its now very open, very blue eyes. So blue. Like a clear, fall sky. And they glowed. He moved the orb to the left, and again the fox followed it with its unearthly gaze, whining and barking at it.

“You want this?” Li asked hesitantly.

The kitsune barked, its two tails twitching. When Li didn’t immediately do anything other than blink, the kitsune howled and howled at him mournfully.

“O-okay.”

Weird, but okay. Li cautiously held the orb out to the fox, placing it gently on the sand between its forepaws before withdrawing. He waited, watching closely as the kitsune fell silent, its clear, glowing blue eyes locked on the orb as it sniffed it and nudged it. And ate it?!

“Oh- I don’t think eating marbles is good for you,” Li stuttered in surprise.

The fox spirit lifted her head and met his golden gaze with her eerie blue and for an endless moment, he couldn’t breathe. Then the blue vanished behind closed eyelids and the fox grinned at him. Grinned! Li was so confused.

The kitsune stood, favoring its back right leg, and hobbled over to him. Li sat still, too afraid of what would happen if he moved. You never knew with spirits. The closer the fox spirit came, the more the tiny hairs on his neck and arms stood on end. Then the fox nudged him with its nose and he could breathe again.

That is, until the mischievous little thing hopped up and snatched his hat from off his head too fast for Lee to stop it. Stunned, Li stared incredulously at the two-tailed spirit that sat there, his hat held in a foxy, sharp toothed grin. The little-

Li huffed and held out his hand. “Give it back,” he said gruffly.
The kitsune sneezed at him and flopped his hat around like a toy. Li pressed his lips together to prevent something hot and impulsive from slipping out. Taking a deep breath through his nose, he swiped for his hat, and missed. Frustrated, he tried again, leaning forward this time. Again, the kitsune dodged, even going so far as to dance out of his reach on dainty paws.

Why that little-!

“Give it back!” he cried.

The fox spirit shook its head as if saying ‘no’ and made a muffled barking sound. The thing was taunting him.

“Give it,” he commanded, swiping for it again, barely stopping himself from falling on his face when the kitsune playfully dodged him again, tails wagging.

“Damn you, give me back my hat!” he shouted, feeling heat burn under his skin.

The fox shook its head and danced out of another swipe, then another, then another.

This was ridiculous. And yet tears of anger and frustration pooled in his eyes. “I save your life and you thank me by stealing one of the only things in this world that I can actually call my own?” he shouted, feeling his cheeks burn in the cool night.

The fox spirit paused mid-dodge and stared at him, tilting it head as if waiting for him to continue.

This was stupid. He was venting to a kitsune.

“I- You- It’s mine!” Li stuttered past his hurt fury.

The fox’s ears twitched and it stood on all four legs, still favoring its injury, and turned as if to leave. That was the last straw.

“I can’t remember anything about my life before a few days ago,” Li shouted after the creature, pounding his hands on the sand. The hot tears that had been clinging to his eyelashes shook free and trailed down his burning cheeks. “I woke up with just my dao, my bag of supplies, the clothes on my back, and that hat. I saved your life,” he cried, digging his fingers in the sand, “the least you can do is give me back my hat.”

The kitsune’s eyes opened again, the crystal clear blue illuminating the dark fur surrounding its eyes like the moon in the night sky. Its two tails stilled and its head drooped as if ashamed. Its ears flattened on its head as it slowly walked up to Lee and laid his straw hat between his hands. Keeping its head down, the kitsune’s unearthly eyes locked on Li’s and he once again lost his breath.

It was like staring into the autumn sky at midday. The spirit’s gaze was limitless, endless, timeless and he was falling.

:Forgive me:

Who?

:I was cruel:

How?

:You wish to know, to learn, to understand:
Know…? He did want to know his birth name, to learn about his past, to understand who he was.

:I too wish to know, learn, and understand.: 

You? Why?

:I am a Knowledge Seeker of Wan Shi Tong.: 

He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things?

:You saved my life and returned what was mine without question. I owe you.: 

Owe me? What?

:I will stay by your side, child of Fire. From this day forth, I will be yours and you shall be mine.: 

Is this… an oath?

:It is. You may call me Zenko.: 

Zenko… ko… 

The blue was gone and he could breath again. Stunned, blinking dumbly staring down at closed eyes. Were they really closed, or just squinting? He swallowed over his suddenly dry mouth.

“U-um, Zenko?” he said slowly.

The kitsune’s ears perked and her head lifted hopefully.

Not exactly sure what to do with himself, Li gulped. He lifted his hat from the sand, then looked back at the kitsune.

“Thank you, Zenko,” he said.

Zenko flashed him a foxy grin and hopped into the hat, settling in the indentation where Li’s head belonged. Li… wasn’t even surprised. He just sat there helplessly and watched as Zenko made herself comfortable, curling up in a ball so her three tails covered her wet nose.

Three tails?

Li blinked. Sure enough, there were three fluffy tails where he could have sworn there had only been two a moment ago. Spirits above. Agni have mercy. Don’t question it. Just go with it.

Shaking his head, Li sheathed his dao, staggered to his feet, and began his walk back across the sand to where Than and Ying should be. Hopefully they hadn’t waited for him. They didn’t have enough rations to last them more than three days if they stayed in this desert.

Clutching his hatfull of fluffy kitsune to his dully aching chest, Li tried to make sense of what just happened. Did that make sense? Should he even try to figure out if it made sense? Probably not. He needed a nap.

A good long nap.

And to get out of this desert.
Passport

Chapter Summary

Than realizes he forgot something important, Ying is relieved but not amused, and Li isn't sure how he feels about Zenko stealing the limelight.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for the delay in posting this. This past week was a bit of a handful. That and the fact this chapter fought me the whole way didn't make things easier. Hopefully, this update is worth the wait.

Than wasn't sure what to think anymore. Li was a puzzle. Li with his new companion was all over the place. Ever since Li had stumbled into their lives, Than and Ying had been up to their necks in strange. Although, to be fair, the strange really started when they met the Avatar some time back. Li’s brand of strange was unique but, in a way, Than liked it. He found it refreshing. Li’s companion, however...

That was another thing to add to Than's ever growing list of 'Strange Things I've Seen But Still Can't Explain.' The fox was a fox. Not a wolf-fox or a coyote-fox or an eagle-fox or even a platypus-fox. It was just… a fox. Just a plain fox, with three tails. He'd never even heard of such a thing. Yet prancing across the sandy dirt, dodging Li’s half-frustrated attempts to catch it, was a simple fox.

Zenko.

That was a Fire Nation name. Li said it meant 'good fox' or something like that. It was a suitable name. The fox was good, if more than a little mischievous. The little fox had way too much energy than its tiny body should have been able to contain.

When Li first arrived with little Zenko curled up in his hat two nights ago in the desert, Than had been surprised. Li looked tired and befuddled and like he wasn't sure what to do or say about anything, let alone the fox in his hat.

It had taken some gentle coaxing from Ying for Li to explain the whole nonsensical situation. Zenko wasn't just a fox, she was a fox spirit. A kitsune. Than lifted his gaze to the heavens and prayed to Oma and Shu for patience. He wasn't sure what to think anymore. First the Avatar, then Li, and now Zenko. Spirit tales were coming alive in his personal life and Than was not prepared to handle this.

He was startled out of his thoughts when the fox yipped. Zenko dropped Li’s hat from her mouth and hopped onto the boy's head just as the Li dove for the hat. Than couldn't stop the amused chuckle that slipped out at the thoroughly befuddled expression on Li’s face. The fox's three tails dangled in front of his face as she adjusted her footing and let loose a yowl of victory that set Than's nerves on edge.
Ying was right, no surprise. Li was good practice at parenting. The boy was old enough to be independent, but young enough to still want someone else to look to. Ying was enjoying the attention the boy gave her immensely. If Than didn't know better, he would've thought the boy was actually treating Ying like a mother and not a strange woman who just happened to not mind helping him. It brought a fond smile to his face.

Particularly after last night.

They had been so close to the edge of the desert that Than had been half tempted to just press onward till they reached the mountains in the distance. But Ying was exhausted and Li’s ribs were still recovering and sunrise was nearly upon them. Zenko had led them to a little rock protruding from the sand at an angle where they made camp for the day.

Zenko had flicked her tails and grinned at them.

It wasn't the usual coyote-fox grin. Zenko's grin carried the weight of thought and calculation behind it. Then Zenko opened her eyes and every hair on Than's arms and legs stood on end. The fox's eyes were solid blue and glowed with an unearthly light that no creature of flesh and blood alone could imitate.

Kitsune. Fox spirit.

Li, what have you gotten us into?

"How much further to the ferry port to Ba Sing Se?" Li asked, sitting up with a put-upon sigh.

Startled from his thoughts, Than blinked. Li had settled on the dirt across from the fire leaning against a tree with Zenko curled up in his lap. The fox was playing with a small, white marble which she nudged back and forth between her two front paws on the ground. The black feathered ostrich-horse sitting close to Ying seemed torn between wanting to move closer to the fire and eyeing the fox suspiciously.

Clearing his throat, Than thought for a moment. "Well, if we push it tomorrow, we should reach the ferry docks by tomorrow night," he said. "It'll be hard, but worth it."

Li nodded silently, tucking his arms into his sleeves. "How does it work exactly?" he asked. "How do they decide who gets into Ba Sing Se and who doesn't?"

"I would imagine we present our passports and they check them against any wanted posters or whatever information they have on file and…" he shrugged, "go from there. Why?"

The boy had stiffened. It was subtle and Than would have missed it entirely had he not been watching Li's face. The slight downturn of Li's lips spoke volumes of the inner turmoil roiling within the boy's mind. Than thought over his words and paled.

"Oh no," he breathed. "Yes, that is a problem."

"What?" Ying asked, sitting up from her cushion of back ostrich-horse feathers. "What is it?"

"I completely forgot." Than sighed, running a hand over his face. "Li doesn't know who he is."

"Yes, but- Oh," Ying whispered. "You don't have a passport," she breathed, gazing at Li.

Li’s shoulders drooped ever so slightly and Than felt like he’d just let the boy down in every way possible. Here he had been encouraging the boy to stay with them, to travel with them to Ba Sing
Se with promises of safety and security. And he'd completely forgotten to talk the boy through the finer points of the technical side of things.

Granted, there were many Earth Kingdom citizens who didn't have passports and who desperately wanted to get into Ba Sing Se, but Than wasn't stupid. Ba Sing Se was The Impenetrable City. It prided itself on its security. They wouldn't let just anyone pass through its walls without some sort of guarantee that the immigrant wouldn't be a danger to it or anyone inside. Passports could be tracked so if anything happened, the Earth Kingdom had a paper trail leading directly to the person responsible.

Did the Fire Nation have passports? Even if they did, Li didn't have a passport so the problem remained. Where and how were they going to get Li a passport?

Than chewed his lip and thought hard. They could probably find someone who would sell them false papers for Li, but he had no doubt the price would be beyond what he and Ying had between them.

"Is there a village nearby?" Li asked suddenly.

"A what?" Than asked, startled. "Yes, I believe so. Why?"

Li tilted his head and glanced at his bag. "I may be able to get what I need," he said softly.

"How?" Ying asked.

"How?" Ying asked, staring at the passport in Li’s hands.

"I borrowed it," the boy said, tucking the important paper in his bag of belongings.

Ying gave Li a particular look and the boy flushed, ducking his head awkwardly. "I left some money," he said weakly.

"Do you intend to give it back?" she asked, pressing a hand to her aching back. She loved her unborn child, but it was doing her back no favors.

Li’s blush intensified and he shifted his shoulders nervously. "No," he muttered.

Ying sighed. "Then you didn't borrow it, you stole it."

"No, I left money for it," Li said.

"Was it the amount demanded?"

"No."

"Too little?"

"No."

"Too much?" Ying said, surprised. Li’s lips quirked upwards at the corners and Ying’s eyebrows met her hairline. "Li, where did you get the money?" she asked shrewdly.

"I borrowed it," Li replied promptly.

"Who did you borrow it from?" she pressed, crossing her arms in the fond frustration only a mother
"Would you believe me if I said I don't remember?" Li said, a small, infectious smile growing on
his face.

Ying groaned and hobbled back to her place next to Than in the immigration line with Li by her
side. "I won't press," she said, glancing at the row of ferries docked in the hidden port to their right.
"I know you needed it. But I do need to know: was anyone harmed last night?"

Li paused, his pale gold eyes wide with hurt. "I didn't hurt anyone," he said, surprised by the
implied accusation. "I didn't even touch anyone."

"Then I believe you," Ying said gently, patting Li’s arm. "Just make sure to keep that passport with
you after we get on the ferry in case you need it later."

Li nodded, his entire form drooping. Zenko made a cackle sound and pawed at Li’s leg until he
sighed and scooped her up in his arms. Ying eyed the fox spirit suspiciously but the foxy grin just
got wider. Ying had a sneaking suspicion Zenko had played a part in Li’s misadventure last night.
She wasn't sure how, but if she was a betting woman, Ying would bet her best scarf Zenko had
been the instigator.

At least her little family had one problem solved now, however dubiously.

Li glanced at Zenko and swallowed back the guilt that was beginning to swirl in his gut. When he'd
gone out last night, he'd only taken his dao and that odd, blue and white mask from his bag with
him. It was familiar, and dangerous.

Catches of emotion, too vague and incomplete to be fully realized memories, sent adrenaline
pumping through his system when he'd touched the mask. He'd worn this mask before. He'd worn
it to… do something… There was fear, anger, and… A face. Fuzzy and distant with so much
emotion tied to it that Lee could barely grasp a portion of it all.

Gone.

Li bit his lip. He'd needed to wear this when he left for the forest last night. He couldn't explain
why, just that it was important. The moment he'd put the mask on and tied it securely in place, he'd
sighed. That feeling was...not safety exactly, but something close. Li may not know who he was,
but that mask still hidden in his shoulder bag was an identity he'd worn before. At least he still had
something to connect him to who he was before... Before.

He had waited until it was Than's watch before slipping away into the woods. Leaving Ying and
Than behind had bothered Li at first. They were the only people who knew him as he was now.
They were familiar, but so was the mask.

It was strange. Than and Ying had become almost like a family to him. In fact, Li couldn't
remember ever being away from them since he woke up as 'Li' in Ying's arms except for that short
misadventure where he'd found Zenko.

Speaking of Zenko, Li glanced at his arms and was almost amused to see the fox spirit wagging her
tails and looking around the hidden port with interest. A part of him had felt annoyed when his
furry cohort joined him last night. But another, quieter part of him had been grateful for the
company.

Zenko's eerie blue eyes had been closed then like they were now, but her mouth had been quirked
upwards at the corners. If Li didn't know better, he would have thought she'd been laughing at him.

Did he know better?

Li dismissed the thought and focused on the memory of the forest spreading out before him. He hadn't been exactly sure why, but every instinct had been all but demanding Li to go back to Than and Ying and sleep! Staying awake all night for the past few nights of travel had helped him snuff his desire to sleep. But Li was feeling those sleepless nights now that all he could do was stand in line and wait his turn.

At least Li didn't have to go too far to get his passport. He'd slipped behind a large tree that had branches low enough for him to reach and began climbing. He remembered Zenko stopping at the base of the tree, barking at him, and pacing in obvious frustration. Li had huffed a wry laugh and reached down to let the kitsune claw her way up his sleeve onto his shoulder.

When Zenko was as settled as she could be, Li had begun to work his way up to the canopy. Tree limbs weren't rooftops, but they gave him a higher vantage point from which to start his search. He'd crouched on the highest branch he dared trust to hold his weight and looked around.

A fair distance away, the faint glow of a fire flickered through the leaves of the trees close to the river to the south. It had taken a bit longer for Li to reach the source than he'd originally thought it would, but it was worth it. There had been a group of people sleeping in two blue fabric tents, one stone shelter probably built by an earthbender, and an old man snoring soundly against a tree.

Just the memory of the odd group still left Li with a sense of confused disbelief. Who had been the lookout? It couldn't be the old man, could it? Li had stayed still and listened to the sounds of the night, trying to hear the faint, tell-tale hints of a look-out scouting around the small campsite. Nothing. Even Zenko had been silent. Too silent.

He'd glanced at the fox spirit perched on his shoulder suspiciously. Although her eyes had been closed, her three tails swished, brushing Li’s back an instant before she leapt down to the branch. Li had begun to climb down after her when Zenko nipped him.

Startled, Li had flinched, rubbing his aching foot and staring at Zenko through the eye slits in his mask. He'd tried to move again and again Zenko nipped him.

"What is wrong with you?" he'd hissed.

She said nothing but her eyes opened and Li tumbled into her gaze.

Wait. She wanted him to wait.

But he needed…

Wait.

But he came all this way to-

Wait!

Reluctantly, Li had nodded. Zenko closed her eyes and swished her tails. She stood on her hind legs and licked Li’s neck briefly before prancing away down the tree trunk to the forest floor and the campsite below. Li pressed his lips together and sulked. He'd sincerely hoped this wouldn't blow up in his face.
Truth be told, Li was still sulking about last night. Zenko had somehow slipped down into that campsite and stolen the passport Li had tucked back in his sleeve. At least Li could find solace in the fact Zenko had taken his advice and snuck the small coin purse Li had given her near the old man in place of the acquired passport. Still, while he was impressed at the fox spirit's cleverness, Li felt like she'd stolen his thunder.

"I could've done that on my own, you know," he muttered just loud enough for the kitsune to hear over the noise of the port. She nipped his finger for his trouble.

He glared at her and she ignored him, choosing to sniff his shoulder bag curiously. She stood unsteadily on Li’s arms forcing him to pause so she could slip into his bag. His cheeks burned self-consciously as he stood awkwardly in the immigration line holding a wriggling bag and sincerely hoping no one noticed.

"No animals."

Startled, Li looked up at the woman in charge of giving and denying access to the Ba Sing Se ferries. She was ugly and her personality left much to be desired as well.

"What do you mean, no animals?" Than asked. "My wife is pregnant. We need the ostrich-horse to-"

"No animals," the woman groused louder. "No exceptions. No outside food or animals are allowed in Ba Sing Se."

Than visibly wilted and turned to his wife who sighed and turned to look at Li. "She's yours, Li," Ying said gently. "What do you want to do?"

Li hesitated. He'd grown fond of the black feathered ostrich-horse during the trip to the ferry docks. She was the first living thing he'd seen after waking up with no memory and it hurt to give her up. But if he was going to get into Ba Sing Se then he didn't have a choice.

He tightened his grip on his shoulder bag, which had mysteriously stopped moving, and nodded. A girl no older than Li approached Ying, took the ostrich-horse's reins, and led the creature away. Another girl handed Ying a small string of coins in exchange before following her partner. Only then did the ugly official stamp Than and Ying's passports.

When Li approached the official's desk, he pulled out his passport and held it out for examination. The ugly woman studied the information printed there, then took a good, long look at Li’s face, before stamping the passport and waving him aside.

To every Spirit Li could think of, thank you for allowing Zenko to borrow the passport that belonged to someone with the same name as one he currently called his own. Than and Ying smiled in relief when Li joined them and together they made their way to the nearest ferry. Li took a deep, steadying breath through his nose, held it, and let it escape through his mouth.

Ba Sing Se. Hopefully, it would be everything Than and Ying prayed it would be.
In which Katara repays a debt to a temporary ally and Li gets an unexpected request from an unexpected person? Or was 'nuisance' a better word? He wasn't sure yet.

Chapter Notes

A/N: As I'm writing this, I am drinking an alcoholic cocktail called the Ba Sing Se. Yes, I am dead serious. And yes, it is amazing. You can't taste or smell the vodka. Just the cucumber and green tea. It is absolutely amazing and refreshing as crap.

In short, I might be a bit tipsy by the time I finish and post this chapter. Just fyi.

Iroh was absolutely distraught. There was no other word for it. Katara hadn't seen the old man look this dreadful since their fight with Azula. When Iroh first appeared during that fight in the abandoned village, Katara had been sure he'd come to capture the Avatar with Zuko. But Zuko never appeared that she'd seen. Iroh had been alone and sided with the Avatar against Azula.

To add to the confusion, Azula had been surprised by both Iroh's appearance and the fact he was fighting against her. Azula had the chance to attack the Avatar directly but she didn't. She'd chosen to strike Iroh directly in the chest at close range with her blue fire instead. That spoke volumes about their relationship.

It was for that reason alone that Katara had decided to take Iroh with them. He’d been injured helping them. She wasn’t so cold-hearted to turn away from something like that. At the very least, she could heal him.

She may not like the Fire Nation, she hated it, but she knew when to thank an ally. Besides, Iroh may be a firebender, but he was still an old man who had helped her and her friends and gotten wounded doing so.

Although she couldn't help but wonder why Zuko hadn't shown up too. She couldn't remember a time when she saw Iroh without Zuko at least in the vicinity if not right next to him. It worried her. She hated Zuko for hunting her and her friends across the world and back, but a part of her couldn’t stop wondering if Zuko was out there somewhere just as wounded as Iroh had been.

Judging from the odd tale Iroh had spun, which she still wasn’t sure she believed by the way, Zuko had struck out on his own. Iroh had been following Zuko from a distance, hoping the boy would see sense and come back. Unfortunately, Azula had stepped in and put a stop to that.

Katara hoped that whoever stole the passport the old man had bought and kept safe for his still missing nephew suffered. She may not like Zuko, but she did like Iroh. Sort of. The man was quiet, wise, and gentle, for a firebender anyway. He didn’t seem to hold any ill will towards Aang despite what had happened at the North Pole.
That was another reason why she was willing to give Iroh the benefit of the doubt. The last time Katara had seen Iroh or Zuko was at the Siege of the North Pole. Iroh had tried to save the Moon Spirit from Admiral Zhao. He’d failed. But he’d *tried* to help and that’s what mattered.

He also made very good tea. Good tea from a kind Fire Nation soul. Who knew such a thing was possible?

Honestly, Katara couldn't remember ever meeting someone from the Fire Nation who was so kind and gentle. Not even Jeong Jeong had been like this. Iroh had hope where Jeong Jeong had seemed like a man devastated by war and hate. Jeong Jeong had even hated his own firebending.

Katara couldn't imagine hating the element that was such an intrinsic part of her. It went against everything she was. Katara was a waterbender, the last waterbender from the Southern Water Tribe. She could never hate or give up her bending for anything or anyone. It was a gift from the Spirits; a gift she planned to use to aid the Avatar in any way she could.

She glanced at Iroh once more and winced, biting her lip sadly. Big, fat tears continued to pool in Iroh's deep amber eyes and spill over onto his cheeks before disappearing into his gray beard. To add insult to injury, whoever had stolen Zuko's passport had the audacity to leave a small bag of coins behind. As if that would make it all better. It disgusted her.

It also confused her. Toph was a master of detecting intruders due to her earthbending. That sense had saved their collective butts several times when those three crazy girls had chased them in a Fire Nation tank. But last night, Toph had sensed nothing.

That was probably the most disconcerting part about the whole affair. Someone had managed to elude Toph's earthbending, stole from them without any of them waking up, and left money behind. Everyone in their little group wanted to know how the thief had accomplished such a feat.

It had shown them, for better or for worse, that they had a severe gap in their defenses. It reminded them that any and all bending had weaknesses. There was always a way to get around bending. They couldn’t rely on bending alone. It was a sobering reminder.

Still.

"I'm afraid this is as far as we go together."

"What?" Aang gasped, turning to face Iroh in surprised dismay. "You're leaving?"

"I'm afraid so," Iroh said, nodding. A faint smile graced his lips as he slipped his hands into his simple clothes of Earth Kingdom brown. “You have my most sincere thanks for taking the time and energy to heal my wounds, Katara,” he said, his amber eyes meeting Katara’s blue.

“It wasn’t a problem,” Katara said. “You helped us.”

“A debt repaid, yes,” Iroh said.

“Still planning on following your nephew, Uncle?”

Katara frowned. She wasn’t sure she’d ever get used to hearing Toph calling Iroh ‘uncle.’ He may have helped them, but ‘uncle’ was just too friendly. Then again, Toph hadn’t seen what the Fire Nation was capable of doing. She hadn’t been hunted merciless for months by Zuko and Iroh. She hadn’t seen the North Pole.

Iroh sighed, “I am, yes. I hope I’ll find him where I’m going. We were heading there before we
separated.” He shrugged. “It’s a place to start anyway. Perhaps I can recruit some friends to help me look for him when I get there.”

“Maybe,” Sokka said reluctantly. “Though, I hope you don’t mind me saying I’ll be happier once you’re gone. No offense,” he offered with a weak shrug.

“None taken,” Iroh said, taking the insult gracefully. “Truth is always preferred to lies.”

“Where’re you planning on going?” Aang asked curiously, his eyes wide and guileless.

“Better not to say, hm?” the old man said with a chuckle as he bent over to gather his things.

Maybe it was the sparkle of lingering tears on his cheeks or the urge to never let a job go unfinished, but whatever it was nipped at Katara’s conscience. With a sigh, she gave in and stood.

“Wait,” she said, brushing the dirt off her clothes. “Let me check your wound one more time before you go.”

“Oh!” Iroh said, genuine surprise on his face. “Why thank you Katara.”

Pulling water from her canteen, Katara urged the water to coat her hands like gloves and pressed the coolness to the old Fire Nation man’s chest. She felt the twinge of hurt and ache from what would soon be scar tissue as well as fading bruises and the faintest hint of once broken ribs, but nothing else.

“I’ve done all I can,” she said, stepping away and tugging the water back into her canteen. “You should still change the wrappings when you get a chance and have it checked if you find another healer somewhere.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Iroh said, with a polite bow of a student to a teacher. Straightening, he hefted his bag to his shoulder and drew a deep breath of fresh air. “Thank you again. Goodbye Aang, Sokka, Toph.”

“See ya, Uncle,” Toph said with a grin.

Katara tuned out the other farewells Aang and Sokka threw after the old man. She may feel sorry for him, and yes, maybe even grateful to him for saving their lives. She’d been honorable. He’d help save their lives in their fight against Azula. She’d saved his life with her healing. She wasn’t indebted to him anymore, so she was glad to see him leave.

Because friend or not, at the end of the day, Iroh was still Fire Nation. He was still the enemy.

Li leaned against the railing of the wooden ferry, loving the salty wind that tugged at his hair and clothes. This, he knew. The steady up and down of the waves, the salty scent of the air, the sound of moving water; he knew it. Maybe he was from a fishing village or something.

His bag jostled his arm, disturbing his calm, and he sighed. Zenko was not happy about being kept in the bag and she was doing her damnedest to make sure Li knew it. He wasn’t happy about the situation either, but there wasn’t much he could do about it. If anyone caught sight of Zenko, there was a very real chance that Li would be expelled from the ferry and Zenko thrown overboard.

That would mean leaving Than and Ying behind. Li may not have known the couple for long, but
that didn’t seem to mean much to his heart. He already felt drawn to them. He wanted to stay with them. They cared about him and didn’t hold his eccentricities against him.

Ying knew he’d swiped the passport and though Li was certain she’d told Than, she hadn’t told anyone else. He was both grateful and confused by that. Why would she trust him and take him at his word alone? She had no reason to, yet she did.

Even when Li returned from running headlong into the desert with a wily fox spirit and no explanation that made sense, Ying had supported him. She held him and waited patiently while he stuttered through a confusing jumble of words that somehow passed as an explanation. He was also fairly certain Ying was the main reason Than hadn’t let him walk away after a day or so.

Like a mother.

He snatched that thread of thought and tried to hold it, but it slipped away. He tightened his grip on the railing and felt his cheeks flush with heat in frustration. He hated feeling like this. It seemed like every time something familiar brushed his mind, it was swiftly swept away like dust under a rug.

Heaving a sigh, Li forced himself to calm down and glance back over his shoulder back to where Ying and Than were resting. He should probably join them, but he couldn’t seem to tear himself away from the water. It was familiar and it couldn’t slip away from him.

He looked down at the empty bowl of what had once been gruel, and pursed his lips. Throwing it out may have been the right decision for himself, Ying, and Than, but his stomach was dead set on complaining loudly. It was embarrassing an-

“Mind if I join you?”

Startled, Li turned around. The speaker was a boy no older than himself with messy brown hair the same shade as his eyes. The boy’s skin was a deep tan that spoke of long hours in direct sunlight, probably doing heavy labor if those lean muscles were any clue.

“Whatever,” Li muttered, deliberately turning back to the sea.

The boy snickered and stepped up to the railing. “You carry dao,” he said. “Know how to use them?”

“Yes.” That was one of the few things Li knew for certain.

“Where’d you learn?”

Li shrugged noncommittally.

“Not much of a talker, are you?” the boy said, a sly grin stretching across his face.

Li shot an annoyed glare the boy’s direction and flushed when it only got him laughed at.

“Prickly too,” the boy said jovially. “No worries. No offense meant.” He shifted so he could lean his right arm on the railing and look at Li directly at the same time. “I’m Jet.”

Li blinked, thrown.

Jet snorted. “This is usually the part where you introduce yourself,” he said helpfully.

Li blinked again, frowning in confusion. “Why?”
Jet stared at Li in surprise before shaking his head in amusement. “You’re weird, you know that? Don’t worry,” he said quickly. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. Although,” he added with a wry glance at the empty bowl on the railing between Li’s hands, “I’d be willing to bet you’re a bit hungry. Throwing food out tends to do that on a fairly reliable basis.”

A flush warmed Li’s cheeks and he looked back at the sea with a huff. His bag shifted under his shoulder and he prayed Jet hadn’t noticed.

A soft hum was just barely audible over the waves. “Why’d you throw it out?” Jet asked. “Granted, I bet it didn’t taste good, but still, food’s food, right?”

Li shifted nervously. “It was bad,” he said softly, casting a brief glance at Jet.

The boy frowned thoughtfully. “Bad? Bad how?”

Why so many questions? Li shrugged. “It was just… bad,” he grumbled. “Something about it was off.”

“So you threw it out.”

Li nodded.

“Huh.”

Go away now.

“Want some real food?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. His stomach answered for him.

“Heh! Should I take that as a yes?” Jet said, a smug smile on his face. Li’s obvious sulk seemed to only fuel Jet’s amusement. “I heard the captain of this here ship-”

“Boat.”

“-and…” Jet blinked. “What?”

“Boat,” Li repeated. “It’s too small to be a ship. It’s a boat.”

“Huh. Seafarer, eh?” He smirked and nodded as if something finally made sense. “Alright, I’ll go with it. Boat. I heard the captain of this boat,” he said, waggling his eyebrows obnoxiously, “is eating like the Earth King while we get the scraps.”

So?

“Care to help me liberate some of that food for us lowly peasants?”

There was so much sarcasm dripping from those words, Li wasn’t sure if answering would land him in a pile of goo or not.

“And your pet.”

…Agni, why? He’d been so careful.

Pale gold eyes slipped to earth brown. No help for it. “She’s not a pet,” he said slowly.
“No?”

“No.”

Jet pursed his lips but nodded. “Whatever,” he chirped, smirking at the flat stare Li shot him. “Interested in helping?”

Li fingered the strap of his bag nervously. He wasn’t surprised to feel soft fur under his fingertips when Zenko shifted in the bag again.

“You won’t tell?” he asked cautiously.

Jet scoffed. “Why would I do that?” he asked in honest confusion. “We all have our secrets. Besides,” he pulled a small stalk of wheat out from between his teeth and waved it expressively, “I doubt one animal would be a huge issue.”

“This coming from someone who snuck food on board,” Li said, his own lips twitching up.

Jet froze, his eyes wide in confusion before settling on the wheat in his hand. The grin that grew on his face was honest and impressed. “I see what you did there,” he teased. “But you still haven’t answered my question. You gonna help or not?”

The bag shifted and Zenko popped her head out of the bag, her eerie eyes shut above her foxy grin. Why was Li surprised? Zenko lived for mischief. She wouldn’t pass up an opportunity to do some sneaking. Food was also a decent motivator too, Li supposed. His stomach grumbled again and Li sighed in defeat.

“Fine,” he muttered. “But she comes too.”

When he didn’t hear an answer right away, Li looked over at Jet and stared. Jet’s mouth was open and he was staring fixedly at Zenko. What was so interesting? Hadn’t Jet ever seen a fox before?

“What?” Li demanded, resting his fingers on the fur of Zenko’s head, scratching behind her ears.

“What… is that?” Jet asked, never letting his eyes leave Zenko.

“A fox.”

Jet shook his head vehemently. “No. I’ve seen coyote-foxes, friend, and that’s-”

“Not a coyote-fox,” Li corrected. “A fox.”

Jet stared at Li like he was stupid. Why?


Jet looked like he very much did not want to believe that. But after another good, long look at Zenko, he sighed and shook his head. “Whatever you say,” he said. “She can come if you want, so long as she doesn’t trip us up.”

“Us?”
“You, me, and my fellow Freedom Fighters, Smellerbee and Longshot,” Jet replied, a proud smile lighting up his face.

“Strange names,” Li mumbled.

Jet lifted an eyebrow. “Says the guy with no name.”

Li glared but it had little effect on Jet. The other boy just shrugged it off with a grin, pushed himself off the railing, and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“We’re going to wait another hour before sneaking into the kitchen upstairs,” he said confidently. “The captain will most likely be in his room resting while his relief takes over for the night. That’ll be the best time to sneak in and take what we need without getting caught.”

Li winced. He loved the night air, but it was always so hard to stay awake the later it got. After the second day, Li had quickly learned that he was a morning person. He rose with the sun. Nighttime had a way of weighing on him until he was practically asleep on his feet in the hours near dawn. The desert had been hell. Traversing at night was the best decision, but Li still hadn’t caught up on the sleep he needed.

Nevertheless, Li knew Ying was close to giving birth. Than was hoping his wife could last until they reached Ba Sing Se so a trained midwife could help ease Ying through the birthing process. But whether Ying managed to hold out long enough or not, she still needed to eat. Lee hadn’t let her eat that rotten slop from before, so if he was feeling the effects of hunger, he could only imagine how much worse it was for Ying. She had to eat enough for two, after all.

“We’ll be there,” he said finally.

“Look forward to it, then,” Jet said, tossing a grin at Li before strolling away to a couple of oddly dressed kids on the other side of the ferry’s deck. That must be Smellerbee and Longshot.

Those really were odd names.

Zenko nosed him, her ears flicking curiously. Li scratched her ears and took a deep, steadying breath of sea air and forced his shoulders to relax. He was too tense. Once he had food for Ying and Than he could relax, but before that he needed to-

A scream ripped through the air.

“Ying!”
In which Li doesn't know what to do, finds something he didn't know he was missing, and Jet might just have to eat his swords.

Li didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know what to do! Ying was giving birth and Li had absolutely no idea what to do to help her. She was screaming and moaning with each contraction and it hurt Li to listen to it. But there wasn’t any true midwife on the ferry so he was stuck trying to figure out what to do to help Than and another woman he didn’t know with the birthing.

He didn’t know what to do!

Fur brushed his shaking hands and he gasped. He’d been so focused on worrying that he’d forgotten to breathe. Agni have mercy.

In, hold, out.

In, hold, out.

He bowed his head and gazed down at Zenko where she lay hidden inside the bag at his side under the straw hat covering the bag’s opening. He could see her tails twitching in concern through the hemp folds. Her nose poked out between the bag’s opening and his hat, pressing into his arm, nudging him steadily in time with his breathes.

Li looked over to Than, wincing sympathetically as the man held his wife’s hand. Than hid his grimace as Ying squeezed it painfully, never once complaining. The older woman next to Li knelt on the floor between Ying’s legs and was surprisingly calm and in control of the situation. Li focused his attention on the woman, trying to match his frantic breathing with Zenko’s nudges.

“Young man,” the woman said curtly, her brown eyes never leaving Ying, “if all you’re going to do is sit there and panic, then leave. Otherwise, be useful and hand me that bowl of hot water.”

Jolting out of his building anxiety attack, Li scrambled for the bowl and pulled it closer. He hesitated when his fingers touched the water’s surface. It wasn’t hot. It was barely even warm. He winced. There wasn’t time to get another bowl of hot water. They would have to make due.

“Here,” he said, handing the woman the bowl. “It’s not hot, but-uh, here.”

The woman lifted her gaze from Ying to the water and clicked her tongue. “Now is not the time for tricks, boy,” she said. “Here. Take this towel, soak it in the water, and then wring it out. I need the heat, not the water.”

“But- um-”

“Now, boy!”
Flinching, Li took the towel and dipped it into the hot water?! He stiffened, staring down at the water’s rippling surface. It wasn’t exactly steaming, but it was definitely hotter than it had been. What?

Not now. Shaking his head, Li soaked the entire hand towel in the water, wrung it out as best he could, and handed it to the woman. She took it with a muttered thank you and reached between Ying’s legs and-

Li flushed and deliberately looked away, face burning in mortification. Dear Agni above, save him. He really should not be here. Ying screamed and Li spun back to her, feeling his panic returning. He couldn’t help her. He couldn’t do anything. He wanted to help but he didn’t know what to do!

“Boy,” the woman next to him said, snapping her fingers in front of his face. He flinched and turned his terrified golden gaze to her. She must have seen something there because the annoyance in her expression faded. “Look,” she said, “I know you’re nervous right now, but your mother needs you.”

“She’s not my-”

“He’s my nephew,” Than said suddenly. Stunned, Li whipped his face to the man who offered him a wane smile in return. “My sister’s son.”

The woman sighed. “Your aunt needs you,” she said, drawing Li’s attention back to her. “Do exactly as I say and we can work through this, okay?” Li gulped, but gave a shaky nod in reply. “Good,” the woman said. “Now, do exactly as I say and we’ll get through this.”

Li nodded so fast his vision blurred. The woman kept him gratefully busy. As long as he was doing something, focusing on some task to complete, the panic stayed at a tolerable ebb. Between his chores and Zenko’s rhythmic nudges, time blurred.

When a new high-pitched cry filled the makeshift birthing room, Li’s eyes grew wide and he stared, unable to think clearly. There, resting in the improvised midwife’s arms, bloody and screaming, was a baby.

“It’s a girl,” the makeshift midwife said, a bright smile on her face.

She took the freshly cleaned warm towel from Li’s limp hands and cleaned the baby, taking care to tie off and clip the umbilical chord. As soon as she was finished, she handed the newborn to Ying. The exhausted mother reached out and, with Than’s help, pulled the child to her chest.

Ying’s face was bright red from exertion and her dark hair was damp with sweat, but her smile, tired as it was, could rival Agni’s luminous face. She pressed a gentle kiss to her baby’s head, and closed her eyes peacefully. Than leaned down and brushed damp hair from his wife’s forehead before gathering his little family in a tender embrace.

Li swallowed and looked away, feeling very much like he was intruding on something private. He moved to help the woman -what was her name? Had she mentioned it before coming to help them? - clean up the mess, when-

“Li.”

He looked up at Ying’s breathless voice, feeling awkward and unsure. One of Ying’s hands reached out to him, her arm barely lifting from her still heaving chest. Confused and worried, Li looked to the midwife who smiled and took the dirty towel from his shaking hands before pushing him over to the new mother.
“Go on,” the woman said, patting his shoulder.

Swallowing, Li shuffled across the floor to Ying’s side. He took her hand delicately in his, his good eye as wide as it could be. Ying’s smile brightened and her fingers tightened around his as much as she could.

“Come here,” she whispered.

Li obeyed, scooting up so he leaned against the wall, mirroring Than’s position with Ying between them. He blinked when Ying closed her eyes and nuzzled his arm by her face.

“My boys,” she whispered.

The baby in her other arm cried and batted her chest weakly. She turned her head to smile at the child, humming softly when Than undid the top couple frog knots of her dress. When Than pulled the fabric away to reveal her left breast, Li blushed bright red and deliberately looked away to give Ying her privacy. He heard Than chuckle and his blush intensified.

“It’s okay,” Ying said. “You can look.”

It took Li a moment to fight back his discomfort before finally giving in to curiosity when the crying faded to faint whimpers. When he did look back, the newborn was suckling Ying’s nipple and resting a tiny hand on the breast. He reached out to touch her, before catching himself and pulling his hand back.

“You can touch her if you want,” Ying said, looking up at him. “Just hold out your finger near her hand.”

Obediently, Li held out his index finger, brushing the newborn’s tiny hand without touching Ying’s breast. He may have permission to look, but he didn’t dare touch. Luckily, he didn’t have to. The hand that was too tiny, too fragile, latched onto his finger and squeezed with surprising strength. Startled, Li froze, unsure whether to stay still or retreat.

It was Ying’s loving smile and gentle, “She likes you,” that settled his frayed nerves. He breathed and consciously forced every muscle to relax, leaning against the wall by Ying’s head. The new mother sighed, squeezed Li’s hand in a comforting manner, and let her head rest on her husband’s lap.

Something nudged Li’s thigh and he looked down to see a rust colored snout poking out from under his straw hat. A helpless smile tugged the corners of his lips up. With one arm pinned against the ferry’s compartment wall and the other held firmly by the newborn, he couldn’t pet Zenko. But judging by the way his hat shifted and the furry snout settled on his thigh and huffed, it didn’t seem like she cared.

Fingers brushed Li’s shoulder and he looked up to see Than smiling at him fondly and tugging his sleeve. Li leaned forward and immediately found himself enveloped in a warm embrace. Than’s strong arm looped around his shoulder, rubbing the back of his neck and Ying sighed, resting safely between them.

His vision blurred and suddenly Ying opened her eyes and gazed up at Li in surprise. Her expression softened to something gentle and soothing. She squeezed Li’s hand once more.

“Oh Li,” she murmured. “It’s okay. I’m here. It’s okay to cry.”

Cry? Oh. Tears. That must be why he couldn’t see clearly anymore. Why was he crying? Why was
there a bone deep ache in his chest? What was this longing feeling that threatened to overwhelm him?

Than’s grip on his neck tightened as he urged Li to lean further. Reluctantly, Li allowed himself to be pulled forward until his forehead rested on Than’s shoulder. The tears became soft, breathless sobs that he couldn’t stop. No one asked him to stop. Than just rubbed his neck and back and Ying hummed what sounded like a lullaby, brushing the back of his hand with her thumb.

“She needs a name,” Than said when Li’s sobs had eased to sporadic hiccups.

Ying hummed, shifting her body with a tired wince. “Hope,” she murmured. “She’s our little Hope.”

“How it is then,” Than said.

Li wasn’t sure how long he stayed in Than and Ying’s embrace, but he knew it was sunset. When he finally lifted his head, he realized the woman who’d acted as the midwife was gone and the mess of birth was mostly cleaned up. He would need to find her and thank her.

Ying and little Hope were asleep but Than was awake and gazing down at his beloved family with a heartbreakingly adoring expression. Li sat up, earning him a questioning glance which he shrugged off with an awkward flush. Than chuckled which only helped deepen Li’s blush.

“I… I’ll be right back,” Li said, moving his hat off his bag of fox spirit, startling her awake. Closed eyes and dusky fur greeted him as Zenko climbed out of the fabric and shook herself.

“Where’re you going?” Than asked softly so as not to wake up Ying and Hope.

Li shrugged, shouldering his dao. “To get some food,” he said quietly.

Than frowned thoughtfully. “They already gave us the night meal,” he said.

“I know,” Li replied. “I’ll be back.”

Guilt pricked his conscience, but he had promised. Sort of. Besides, now that Ying had given birth, getting the food from that kitchen was more pressing than before. The cool, moist sea air that met him when he left the confines of the compartment was refreshing and helped calm his thoughts.

“How is she?”

He jumped at the unexpected voice, spinning to see Jet leaning against the outer wall of the compartment. Jet’s dark eyes were edged with concern when he glanced at Li. Taking a deep breath, Li crossed his arms.

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Li held out his arms and waited for Zenko to hop up into them. He held still while she climbed up to his shoulder, her tails swishing to help keep her balance. “Ready.”

Jet stared openly at the fox spirit who cocked her head and stared right back at him with her closed eyes and toothy grin.

“Just a fox, my ass,” he muttered, pushing himself off the wall. “Smellerbee and Longshot are keeping an eye out for any guards. The kitchen's on the deck above this one and the captain’s quarters are next to it. The control room-”

“Bridge,” Li said.

Jet paused, then snorted and shook his head. “The bridge is above that,” he finished, popping his twig back into his mouth. Then he grinned and waggled his eyebrows. “So,” he drawled, “your name’s Li.”

Do not hit him.

Jet watched as Li expertly wielded his dao, scooping up several whole pig-chickens and dumping them into one of the bags they snatched from the hooks by the kitchen door. The fox which Jet was beginning to seriously wonder really was just a fox hopped from Li’s shoulder to the pantry door. It nosed the door open and disappeared into the dark room. When it came out, it was dragging three bags of baked bread.

There was no way that fox was just a fox. No way in hell.

Jet grabbed some of the vegetable bowls sitting on the counters and dumped them into his bags. His bags were almost full when Li suddenly caught his attention.

“Grab some cups!”

“What? Why?” Jet hissed, glancing at the door. Smellerbee and Longshot were good at what they did, but you could never be too careful.

“For the water,” Li said, gesturing to the bucket of water he had near his feet. “It’s better to do that then let people drink with their hands. Less chance of contamination.”

Contamination? Okay, maybe there was such a thing as too careful. But then again…

Jet looked around and though he couldn’t find cups, he did find the bowls they’d had that slop served in to them from earlier. He grabbed those instead.

“That should be enough,” he said, turning back to Li. “Let’s go.”

Jet slipped out of the kitchen and down the walkway towards the steps leading to the main deck below. He glanced back behind him to check on Li’s progress, rearing back when he came face to face with the other boy. Damn, the guy was silent on his feet. Jet smirked and continued down the stairs.

He signaled the all clear to Longshot and tossed a grin back to his silent, sneaky companion. “Nice work,” he said.
Li said nothing, but the fox perched precariously on his shoulder trilled what could probably pass for a howl around the bags of bread in its mouth. Jet narrowed his eyes at it, still not sure what to think. The fox looked directly back at him with its closed eyes and the hairs on the back of Jet’s neck stood on end.

Yeah. If that fox was really just a fox, Jet would eat his swords. Then again, Jet glanced back at Li’s pale gold eyes, the same could be said for the fox’s master.
Ba Sing Se

Chapter Summary

In which Li gets two offers of belonging and Iroh has hope.

It’s... enormous. They were still far from land but Li can see the walls of Ba Sing Se and he could barely believe his eyes. Glowing red in the light of the newly risen sung, the walls were so tall it made him feel small even from this distance. Tall, thick, all-encompassing, and fiercely defended, Ba Sing Se was the famous Impenetrable City. This was the place Than and Ying had been seeking; where they wanted to live with their newborn daughter in safety.

Safe. Ba Sing Se was safe. And Li was almost there. They were all almost there.

But with that safety came a niggling thought that had begun whispering in his mind and dreams. He hoped it was nothing but his anxiety attempting to work him into a state. But hoping and knowing were two different things. The only way to know for sure was to ask.

But how would he know if he asked he would be planting the idea into Than and Ying’s minds in the first place? How would he know he wasn’t directly responsible for being left to his own devices once they entered the walls?

That was the root of the problem. He didn’t want to be alone. He didn’t want Than and Ying to leave him. He didn’t want them to let him go. He wanted to stay. He wanted to... He wanted a family, their family.

“You know,” Li stiffened when Jet appeared in his peripheral vision, wheat stalk bouncing between his lips with each word he spoke. “Most people panic if they aren’t allowed passed the Wall.” Jet glanced at Li and smirked. “Unless there’s something I don’t know.”

Li grimaced and deliberately kept his gaze on the great Wall, avoiding Jet’s face. He should have known the arrogant boy would take offense. He did not know Jet would act on his offense by leaning over and sticking his face directly in Li’s. He gasped and flinched.

“What?” Li gasped in a choked voice. “Don’t you have any concept of personal space?”

“Yeah, I’m aware of it,” Jet said, shrugging in a nonchalant manner. “I just choose to ignore it.”

Why was Li not surprised? He sighed and hefted his bag of fox spirit higher up his shoulder, ignoring Zenko’s muffled complaint. After two days on the slow moving ferry, Zenko was ready to get out of her confining bag and she was not bothering to hide her growing annoyance. She’d already nipped Li’s fingers five times this morning alone. It was trying Li’s patience. He did not need Jet adding to his mounting frustration.

Huffing, Li turned on his heel and strode across the deck towards the other side. It was early enough that most of the refugees on board were still asleep below or just making their way outside. Unfortunately, that meant it was easy for Jet to follow him.

Biting back a particularly snarky retort, Li paused. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, held it, counted to five, and let it out. When he opened his eyes again, he glared at the persistent jerk who
had the audacity to grin at him.

“What do you want?” Li ground out.

“What?” Jet asked. “I can’t hang out with a friend?”

“Wha-? I hardly know you,” Li squawked.

“Obviously. Who knows anyone after a couple days?” Jet said, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

Li gave Jet a flat stare and stepped around him, only for Jet to block his path yet again. Fuming, Li glared at the boy. “What do you want?” he demanded again.

Jet’s smirk softened to something darker and perhaps even sadder. “I was wondering if you had any plans for once we got into Ba Sing Se,” he said.

Well that was the question of the day, now wasn’t it?

“I was afraid of that,” Jet murmured under his breath, glancing away. “Look, no pressure or anything, but if you’re interested, you can stay with me, Smellerbee, and Longshot. We don’t have much money,” he admitted with a shrug, crossing his arms, “but we have enough to afford a place to stay. We’ll have to get jobs to keep the money coming, obviously, but...” He tilted his head, pursed his lips, and met Li’s bewildered gaze.

Wha... Where did this come from?

“Wh-why are you asking me?” Li stuttered past his surprise.

“Because I know a fellow outcast when I see one,” Jet said seriously, every hint of a smile gone from his face.

Li flinched, clenching his fist around the strap of his shoulder bag. Zenko made a soft bark and poked her head out of the bag, her furred ears brushing Li’s sleeve.

“I’ve watched the way you interact with your companions,” Jet continued. “They care about you and you care about them.” He grimaced. “It may have been ten years, but I remember the feeling of a family. Adopted or not, they matter. I don’t want to take you away from them,” he said quickly, holding up a hand to forestall the rebuke on the tip of Li’s tongue. “That’s not my intent.”

“You have an odd way of showing it,” Li said carefully.

Jet sighed and chewed his wheat stalk. “I just want you to know you’re not alone,” he said. “If you ever want some friends, we’re here. We’re used to crowds of people. We lost them a while ago and, well,” Jet suddenly looked slightly uncomfortable, “we miss it. It’s weird only having three of us when we used to have thirty.”

“Thirty?” Li repeated in confusion. “That’s...” How to say it? “How did you ever get privacy?”

Jet blinked, then laughed. “You could find it if you really wanted it,” he said, waving Li’s question aside. “Besides, we all lost some people we cared about, people we loved to the Fire Nation. They had nowhere else to go, so they came to me and became part of the family.”

Li frowned. “Why you?”

“Why not me?” Jet asked honestly. “I was the oldest one there, I’d lived there for years already, and I had experience fighting and surviving. I could protect them.”
And yet they’re gone now. Li didn’t say it out loud, but he had the feeling he didn’t really have to.
Still, if he looked at Jet’s stance closely, he could see the sadness radiating off of him. It was
subtle, but there if you knew where to look.

In a twisted way, Li knew that sadness. He just didn’t know how to respond to it. He’d lost his
family, his friends, his name, everything. It still frightened him, but he didn’t know how to be sad
for something he couldn’t remember. He missed the family he couldn’t remember; he was even sad
they were gone. But he didn’t know what his family was like, what they looked like, how they
acted, anything. He couldn’t even remember if they loved him.

So while he could sympathize, he couldn’t truly understand Jet’s pain.

But Jet’s offer wasn’t the be all, end all of this situation. It wasn’t a demand for friendship, it was
an offer. Li was free to say no if he wanted to. The question now was, did he want to?

“I’ll think about it,” he said after a moment.

Jet nodded, accepting that answer. “Keep in touch?” he asked, hope evident in his eyes and tone.

“I’ll try,” Li said. That was all he could offer.

“We made it,” Ying breathed.

She was still exhausted from both the trip and the birthing, but she refused to enter Ba Sing Se any
way but on her own two feet. Than had a supporting arm around her upper back, helping her stand
upright. Hope was cradled in her arms and Li stood off to her side staring shamelessly up at the
great Wall.

They’d made it, together. The lady at the immigration desk hadn’t been nearly as welcoming as the
lady before they boarded the ferry. But now they were here, in the train station, waiting for the
train that would take them into Ba Sing Se proper to arrive. It was Ying’s dream come true.

They would have to find some place to live and work, but between Than and Li, she was sure that
could be accomplished. Once Hope was old enough, Ying could start looking for work as well.
Between the three of them, Ying knew they would be fine. If there continued to be three of them.

She glanced at Li, studying the boy’s face. Li’s pale gold eyes darted here and there, taking in the
stonework and people at the train station with wary curiosity. She wanted very much for him to
stay. She’d only known him for a week and yet Li had wormed his way into her heart as quickly
and efficiently as little Hope had. And Ying knew Li had no idea. It broke her heart.

That scar… Whatever had happened to Li to force him to lose his memory, she knew in her heart it
wasn’t pleasant. Li was a good person who wore his heart on his sleeve for all to see and, for better
or worse, to judge. Li looked at everything with wonder, curiosity, and more than a little fear.

Ying hadn’t missed the way Li was turning to her more and more when he faced something he
didn’t know how to deal with. Without either of them realizing it, Ying had become Li’s surrogate
mother and she couldn’t find a reason to hate that. Li may not be her son by blood, but he was a
part of their little family of four, whether he was ready to admit it or not. She only hoped Li could
see that.

She leaned over and nudged the boy with her shoulder, smiling when he jumped and stared at her,
“Li,” she said, “I know I said this earlier, but you’re welcome to stay with us. I understand if you want to use this opportunity to find out who you are, but I’d love it if you stayed.” She reached out and slipped her hand into Li’s, smiling as the boy’s blush deepened. “We would be honored to help you.”

“We would,” Than said with a smile. “Another pair of hands is always a good thing.”

Ying clicked her tongue and elbowed her husband playfully. “Ignore him,” she said, giving her husband a lovingly tolerant look. “You’re good company, Li,” she said. “If you decide to leave, know that you’re always welcome under our roof.”

Pale gold eyes that should have filled Ying with terror were wide with shock and hope. Ah, so she’d been right. Li must have thought they wanted him to leave now that they had reached Ba Sing Se.

“Of course,” she added, “my husband was right about one thing.”

“Just one?” Than said, his lower lip sticking out in a melodramatic sulk. She swatted his small topknot with a teasing grin earning her the warm laughter she adored.

“Many things,” she corrected, rolling her eyes. “But in this case,” she turned back to Li, “if you stay, you can work with my husband and me. We work with pottery. If you’re interested, we can teach you as well.”

“It’s a lot of work but it’s rewarding,” Than added, winking. “Besides, if you work with pottery, you can get dirty and no one thinks less of you.” Ying rolled her eyes and Than snorted. “It’s true.”

Ying chuckled. Than was right. For a full grown man, Than would always be such a boy.

“If…”

Ying whipped her gaze to Li, trying hard to keep the hope from growing in her chest. If Li said no, she would be devastated. She would understand, everyone had to go their own way eventually. But she would still be devastated.

“If I stay,” Li said slowly, “it wouldn’t be a problem?”

Oh Li. “Not at all,” Ying said with a gentle smile. “And even if it were, I doubt it would be anywhere near the kind of trouble this one,” she nodded to her husband, “could get into. Than can’t go anywhere without tripping over trouble.”

“Well,” Than said, scratching his head with a sheepish smile, “at least one of those incidents resulted in you.”

“I never said I regretted any of it,” Ying said, grinning. “I’m proud of it and it’s one of the many reasons why I love you. Trouble and all.”

“Then,” Li spoke again, “if you don’t mind,” his gaze flickered up at them before dropping to his feet, “I’d like to stay.”

Her heart soared and Ying couldn’t stop the smile from blossoming on her face. “Then welcome to the family, Li,” she said, squeezing the boy’s hand.
Li’s eyes met hers and a tiny, genuine smile tugged his lips up.

“Do you like working with your hands?” Than asked, glancing back at the train track when the sound of stone moving against stone grew louder.

“I… don’t know,” Li admitted, ducking his head.

“I think you will,” Than said. “It’s relaxing and it can help when you just want to break something sometimes. Word of advice, save some of your mistake pieces for when you need to throw something and get a satisfying crash.” He laughed.

“You throw things?” Li said, eyeing Than warily.

“Only when I’m alone after a long day dealing with rude customers,” he admitted. “But I much prefer throwing kites. I could teach you how to build a kite too. My father loved kites,” he said, stepping up to the track as the train pulled up and stopped. “I may have taken after my mother and preferred pottery, but I still make kites when I can. It’s my way of remembering my father.”

“Is he gone?” Li asked, stepping into the nearest car with Than and Ying when the train doors opened.

“He died a few years ago,” Than said.

“Oh.” Li dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry.”

Than put his hand on the boy’s shoulder and squeezed. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “It was a long time ago. How ‘bout this. I’ll teach you how to build a kite and we’ll go fly it on one of the hills in Ba Sing Se. What do you think?”

“Ooh, I might join you,” Ying said. “I love your kites.”

“We’ll make a picnic of it,” Than said, smiling proudly.

Ying watched as Li’s smile broadened and his shoulders drooped, the tension leaking out of them. The boy even began to sit straighter the more Than regaled him with stories and ideas. This wasn’t exactly what she expected when she and Than started this journey, but she couldn’t imagine a more perfect result. She loved her little family so much.

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A bell from somewhere nearby rang once as Iroh rushed towards the train as fast as his feet could carry him. But he was out of shape and his ferry had landed late. He’d hoped to catch this train before it left, otherwise he would have to wait for the next one. While he didn’t mind waiting, he didn’t want to.

Zuko knew they were going to Ba Sing Se. If something happened to his beloved nephew, Iroh would never forgive himself. He could only hope that some of his contacts in the White Lotus could help him locate his nephew. With any luck, Zuko was on his way to or, better yet, already in Ba Sing Se. Iroh could hope.

The bell rang again, twice this time and Iroh picked up his pace, one hand clutching his bag to his chest and the other holding his new straw hat. He stumbled when three young rascals bolted past him, easily out-pacing him.
“Sorry!” the shortest member of the group shouted back, his short brown hair blowing in his face.

The leader of the group said nothing but tossed a reckless wave over his shoulder. He hopped onto the train car, turned around and yanked his two companions in just as the doors slid closed. The tallest brunette’s proud grin around the wheat stalk in his mouth brought a wry smile to Iroh’s own mouth.

Oh well. There was always the next… train…

Zuko.

Zuko was on the train.

Iroh watched in despair as the train pulled away from the station too fast for him to react, taking his heart with it. It had only been a glimpse, but the old general would recognize his nephew’s distinctive scar anywhere. Zuko was here. Zuko was in Ba Sing Se.

And Zuko had been smiling.

It both broke Iroh’s heart and filled him with joy to see that smile, however briefly. He had begun to fear he would never see that smile again; that the boy who once smiled like that had died when the Fire Lord planted his burning fist in his face. Or perhaps earlier, when Lady Ursa vanished.

But that smile… It gave Iroh hope. He knew now that the Zuko he adored was still in there somewhere.

Ba Sing Se was an enormous city. It wouldn’t be easy for Iroh and the White Lotus to find Zuko, but they would try. It would take time, but eventually they would succeed. Patience was a virtue not lightly dismissed after all.

Speaking of patience, Iroh took a seat on one of the stone benches to wait for the next train.

“Tea!” someone hollered in a bored tone. “Fresh brewed tea!”

Ah, tea. A perfect companion for patience.

“Excuse me,” Iroh said, waving the salesman pushing a car of tea towards him. “You wouldn’t happen to have a nice cup of ginseng tea, would you?”

“That’d be two copper,” the salesman said, instead of answering politely.

The poor man must be having a long day, Iroh thought. “Of course,” he said, digging out two copper coins from his meager purse and handing them to the salesman.

The man swiped them without really looking, poured some tea into a cup, and handed it to Iroh. Then he left without word, pushing his cart before him and hollering the same sales pitch in the same bored tone.

Iroh furrowed his brow at the coolness of the cup but paid it no mind and took a sip, only to promptly spit it back out. “Cold tea?” he cried, distraught. “Such a travesty.”

With a quick glance around the station, he breathed on the liquid, smiling when the warmth seeped through the cup into his fingers. Another sip, and he sighed in bliss. Tea and patience. He was in Ba Sing Se. Zuko was in Ba Sing Se. They would find each other again. This was the Impenetrable City, the symbol of hope.
Iroh had hope.
Chapter Summary

In which Ying gets a visitor, Li is frustrated, and Zenko has a sneaky idea involving a night run, a library, and a certain mask.

Ying loved Li. She really did. But she was quickly learning the boy had absolutely no social skills, at all. Not even remotely. She sighed in fond exasperation as Li answered their latest customer’s questions with short, curt replies. She knew he didn’t mean to be rude, but the customer didn’t know that and, well…

“Excuse me,” she said, interjecting herself into the conversation before it became a shouting match. Li was doing a magnificent job controlling his no doubt Fire Nation temper she could feel bubbling just beneath the surface. But she wasn’t sure how much longer that fragile control would last.

She flashed the customer a friendly smile and shifted Hope so the baby settled more comfortably in her arms. The sight of the baby helped to calm the customer’s rising temper, which served her just fine.

“I’ll handle it from here,” she said gently, patting Li on the back. “Go back and help Than with the kiln, please Li. I get the feeling he’ll be needing help with the latest batch of jars.”

Li flushed and ducked his head awkwardly. She squeezed his shoulder and nudged him towards the back of the shop, following him with her eyes. She would need to check up on him later this afternoon.

“I’m sorry,” she said, turning back to the customer. “He doesn’t usually work the shop, but I was a bit busy with little Hope here,” she lifted Hope in her arms, “and couldn’t come earlier.”

“Not at all,” the elderly gentleman said, his expression softening at the sight of Hope. “I understand. Although,” he glanced back where Li had vanished, “perhaps you might teach him some manners.” He lifted an eyebrow at her to which Ying smiled.

“Oh, I think he was doing just fine,” she said. “You got him to speak more than he usually does. That’s rather impressive.”

The man, rubbed his graying mustache and eyed her. “Ah, I see,” he said, sounding unsure of himself.

“Now then,” Ying said, bringing her customer service smile to her face. “How can I help you?”

Three customers and two sales later, Ying stepped back from their little shop’s display and sat down on the bench. The cloth hanging over their display shaded her from the midday sun but did nothing for the heat and humidity. At least she wasn’t alone.
This entire section of the Lower Ring was where the refugee artisans lived and worked and sold their craft. This particular block was devoted to the potters’ guild of which she and her husband belonged. That had made it, well not easy, but most certainly easier to find housing and a kiln to work their craft. Neither Ying nor Than were earthbenders; so if they had to build their own kiln, that would have put them out on the street before they had the chance to even start a life here.

They shared this building and the ones around it with the other potters of the guild. They couldn’t live here, of course, because they were already occupied. But they were free to use the private quad in the center of the block hidden from the street. The potters worked their craft in the shaded areas of the quad near the building where prying eyes couldn’t watch. The kilns were grouped together in the center of the quad, away from the buildings to prevent a fire hazard.

Than was probably back there still working on teaching Li how to work the clay. Li was struggling to grasp the intricacies of the craft due to his impatience and frustration at whatever result he deemed not good enough. But he was nothing if not determined. Ying was sure the boy would pick up the skills eventually.

She would have enjoyed working the clay with her hands too, but she would have to wait until later in the day when she and Than switched places. Little Hope still required the majority of Ying’s attention and everyone seemed to understand that. Especially Li.

Bless that boy. The first few days in Ba Sing Se, Li had hovered close to her, never straying far from her side. At first, she’d thought Li was intimidated by the sheer size of the city. She certainly had been. It was one thing to hear and know Ba Sing Se was big. It was another thing entirely to see it laid out before her.

That was perhaps a part of the problem, she admitted. But the center of the problem was Li’s awkwardness around people. He quite simply didn’t know how to act around large groups of people and that was Ba Sing Se. Lots of people squished into a large, yet very compact space.

However, with a baby in the mix, Li seemed to relax and smile more. He took advantage of every chance he got to hold Hope and watch her when Ying had to work. It warmed her heart to see her children bonding. Hope had taken to Li quickly and sometimes demanded rather vocally for Li to stop what he was doing and hold her.

Those moments were infinitely precious. She could see Li’s expression soften and the tension in his pale gold eyes ease when Hope would scream and reach for him. If he ever had a sibling in his old life, Ying was sure they were loved.

“Hello?”

Straightening from her seat, Ying smiled at her new customer. “Yes, hello,” she called, drawing the young man’s attention. She stood and stepped closer to her table of wares. “Can I help you with something?”

“Well now that I’ve seen your face, I know you can,” the boy said, scratching his mane of messy brown hair and grinning around a twig clamped between his teeth.

Ying blinked. “I-I’m sorry?”

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” the boy said quickly, waving his hands in casual dismissal. “I just recognize you is all. We were on the same ferry together.”

“Oh!” Ying blushed and ducked her head shyly. “Yes, I’m sure I was a bit… memorable.” At least
her screams were.

The boy threw his head back and laughed. “That too, yeah,” he said gaily. “You should have seen
Li’s face when he heard you scream. He looked ready to swim across the entire bay just to get to
you if he had to. But when he ran inside and saw you lying there giving birth,” he collapsed into
helpless guffaws, “I swear, I thought he was going to faint right there.”

Ying laughed. “He’s certainly endearing, isn’t he,” she said with a smile. “He was very helpful.”

“I’m sure he was,” the boy said. “I’m Jet, by the way.” He extended his hand over the table of jars
and vases.

Ying adjusted her hold on Hope and grasped the boy’s offered hand. “Ying,” she said.

Jet brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it, his brown eyes never leaving her face. “Charmed,”
he said.

Ying scoffed and batted Jet’s dirty face playfully. “I’m sure,” she said wryly. “Li’s in the back at
the moment. If you come back this afternoon, I’m sure he’ll be free to visit.”

“No worries,” Jet said. “I’m actually working myself, at the moment. I was just passing by and
recognized you. Does Li live here with you?”

“No. Well, yes, but no,” Ying said, glancing down at Hope when she began to wake up from her
nap. “We live at the apartment complex just down the way.”

Jet nodded, leaning down to pick up the two long poles with pales of water on either end and
bracing them on his shoulders. “Be back later then,” he said.

“Should I tell Li you were here?” Ying called after him.

“No. I’ll surprise him,” Jet replied. He tossed her a wink and rounded the corner.

Ying sighed gustily. “I’m sure that will go over well,” she mumbled. Turning away from her table
to grab a blanket, she sat down on her stool once more. She undid the frog knots on the corner of
her dress, tugging the fabric down for Hope to suckle. She draped the blanket over her shoulder for
modesty and waited for the next customer.

Li huffed as yet another piece of clay sloughed off of what he’d sincerely hoped would be a decent
jar. His shoulders drooped, then tensed as he peeled off the fallen clay and laid it aside. He would
deal with it later. For now, he had to think of a way to save his creation.

The jar wouldn’t really be much of a jar anymore now that it lost a quarter of its side from the top
lip. But it could possibly pass for an interesting pitcher if he was a bit more careful. If he kept what
was left of the wet clay from falling apart too, then he might just be able to work the extra clay into
a handle.

Frowning, Li placed his hands gently against the wet clay once more, pressing lightly against it as
the potter’s wheel spun. This was something relaxing. He didn’t like messing up, but there was
always the chance he could recover if he didn’t leave his error unworked for too long. He had only
been at this under Than and Ying’s tutelage for a week, but he was getting better. His pottery was
passable, but nowhere near as masterful as his teachers’.
Ying had delicate hands which she used to mold her clay into sweeping vases. Than preferred the shorter, fatter jars to Ying’s vases. But when it came to the decoration after the pottery dried, Ying was the true master. Her fingers were steady when they held a brush. Her attention to detail was awe-inspiring. What Li would give to be even remotely close to her skill level.

Zenko shifted on his shoulders, her tails draping around his neck to twitch against his other shoulder. She was taking a break from the children playing in the quad. A low wall kept them away from the group of four, burning hot kilns, but the rest of the quad was their world to rule. They had taken a liking to Zenko almost immediately, despite their parents’ initial misgivings. Granted, a wild animal loose near working potters and active kilns was never a good idea. But Zenko wasn’t a wild animal. She was a very intelligent fox spirit who was clever enough to keep the children busy for hours, and smart enough to avoid places where she wasn’t wanted. She rested her snout on her forepaws and huffed, her ears tickling the unscarred side of his face.

Li grimaced. He’d known about the scar on his face. How could he not? He lived with it. But when he’d first looked into a mirror and seen it… It hadn’t been pretty. He hadn’t felt anything. It almost scared him at how empty he felt looking at the scar. It was like that mark represented everything he’d lost, everything that had been taken from him.

Then Zenko had hopped onto his shoulder and licked him right on his scar and looked at him with her too blue eyes. It wasn’t okay. It would probably never be okay. But she knew, she understood, and she would keep her promise. She would stay by him and help him learn who he was.

“Li.”

Looking up from his work, Li noticed Ying moving across the courtyard filled with potters and children. He returned his attention to his work, glancing at Ying every now and then until she sat next to him.

“What’s this?” she asked, studying his jar-turned-pitcher.


Ying chuckled. “Well, you have a visitor in the front store when you finish,” she said. Without waiting for a response, she stood and walked over to her husband’s potter wheel.

Li nodded absently, then paused. “I have a what?”

“Hi,” Jet said, smug grin plastered on his face and waving like a lunatic.

Li shut the door in his face.

“Hey, come on Li,” Jet hollered through the door. “I just wanted to say hi.”

“You did,” Li said, ignoring the heat growing in his face. “Now go away.”

“Aw, don’t be like that.” Li jumped and whirled to face the shuttered windows nearby overlooking the street. Jet was leaning on the sill, grinning around his twig and snickering. “You really do blush easily, don’t you?”

“What do you want?” Li cried, feeling the heat in his face increase as he stalked over to the
“I already said, I wanted to say hi,” Jet said easily.

Li fumed. “If that’s all you wanted, then-”

“And I wanted to ask you if you were doing anything later?” Jet continued, steamrolling over Li words.

Li hesitated, unsure. “Why?” he asked carefully.

Jet shrugged. “I’m bored,” he said. “I’ve worked all day, you’ve worked all day, and you clearly need to let off some steam.” He snorted. “Besides, I need to keep my reflexes up. All swordsmen should,” he added more seriously.

That was true, Li admitted. With all the commotion of moving in and starting his training as a potter, Li hadn’t found time to practice with his dao. He didn’t dare do it in their tiny, rented apartment or here where children were. He couldn’t even remember how or where he learned to fight, just that he could and that he was good. But no swordsman stayed good if they didn’t practice.

“When and where?” he asked reluctantly.

“There’s an empty warehouse not too far from here,” he said. “It’s not great, but it’s open. There this old guy who keeps the place clean. Doesn’t talk much, but I’d doubt if he’d mind us practicing.”

“You haven’t asked yet, have you?” Li said in an unimpressed tone.

“Nope.”

Li sighed heavily. Zenko shifted on his shoulders, getting to her feet and hopping onto the window sill. Jet flinched back, eyeing her warily. She gave Jet a quick glance before settling in the fading evening light and grooming herself.

“I’ll be there,” Li said after a moment. “But I can’t stay long.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Jet said, waving Li excuse aside. “I know how it is. Wake up early, go to bed late, no time to play with the mates.”

Li blinked in confusion. Jet laughed.

“See you tonight, Li,” he said. He stepped back from the sill and, after one last, uncertain look at Zenko, left.

Li ran his hands over his face with a groan. He been hoping to have the night to himself. He’d planned on spending the evening wandering around this section of the city to both orient himself and find any public notice boards. As far as he knew, there weren’t any. None. At all.

That along with the ‘There is no war in Ba Sing Se’ that his fellow refugees enforced when in public just rubbed him the wrong way. He barely knew who he was and now what little he did know about the world, he couldn’t talk about. No one spoke of the war except in the relative safety of dark corners. It was maddening. He needed to know!

Something soft and damp brushed his hands and he peeked out between his finger to- Blue.
There was a library in the Middle Ring.

Really? But the people of the Lower Ring weren’t allowed into the Middle Ring.

Not at night, no. But during the day…

He had work and he wasn’t sure how useful a library would be in helping him find out who he was.

It was worth a try. And it could help with your headaches.

True. He groaned and rubbed his head. It had been aching dully for the past couple days. It wasn’t serious, but it was beginning to annoy.

A healer would probably be best.

That costs money. Another problem he couldn’t bring to Ying. They were living off what they made and the little they got from the guild shares. It wasn’t much, but it paid rent and got food on the table. Nothing more.

It was worth a try.

Decided, Li nodded. He would visit the library at the Ba Sing Se University tomorrow morning.

Or, they could visit tonight. They both missed running free. Plus, it would be another chance to wear the blue and white mask that tugged at his memories.

Yes. It was definitely worth a try.
 Damn Li was fast. Jet was barely able to keep up. Li definitely knew what he was doing. He treated his dao blades as extensions of his arms as opposed to just two swords. It was a type of dual wielding that Jet hadn’t come across.

Most people Jet fought were firebenders and firebenders were notorious for never carrying weapons. They relied on their bending alone. It was both a blessing and a curse. Firebenders were great at distance attacks but tended to suck once an opponent got into close range. Jet was infamous for using this weakness against them.

The regular Fire Nation foot soldiers tended to be a bit more of a challenge merely because they varied in skill and weapon preference, unlike firebenders. This wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, though. Jet liked a nice dose of the unexpected every now and then.

And Li was definitely a fresh blast of unexpected. Who would have thought the refugee boy was a master swordsman? Because, although it galled Jet to admit, Li was, if not a master, then pretty damn close to being a master swordsman. Some of the moves Li pulled off caught Jet off guard more than once. It was immensely fun.

Jet grinned and hooked the blade of one of his swords around one of Li’s dao and jerked. Li’s eyes widened a fraction before narrowing as Li moved with the jerk, riding the momentum into a tuck roll on the dusty ground. Oh yeah! Jet had the higher gro-
Erk! He coughed when Li lashed out with a surprise kick to Jet’s unprotected gut. Winded, Jet stumbled back, crossing his blades protectively moments before Li flipped back to his feet and pressed his advance. Golden eyes flashed with a fierceness Jet admired. It reflected the burning fury that had once fueled Jet back in his arboreal home.

Jet may have left that life behind, but that didn’t mean he didn’t miss this. The adrenaline rush of battle, the thrill of fighting an opponent of matching skill, the freedom of deciding the battlefield and knowing nothing serious hung on the outcome of the battle. This was a game and Jet was loving every minute of it. Judging from the spark in Li’s eyes and the way Li’s lips turned up at the corners made it abundantly clear to Jet that his opponent was enjoying this just as much as he was. Apparently, both of them needed this more than they thought they had.

There was no spoken word or obvious indication given. They both just bounced back from each other, landing in ready stances, before lowering their weapons. The synchronous movement brought a snicker to Jet’s lips.

“What is it?” he teased, twirling one hook sword in a deceptively careless motion. “Bored of me already?”

Li bristled and damn it was so easy to make him do that. “You did the same thing,” Li snapped, his cheeks a blotchy red from more than just exertion.

Jet shrugged and tucked his swords back into their designated belt loops. “Did I?” he said, enjoying the way Li’s shoulders shook with barely controlled frustration.

“Yes!”

“Looked to me like we both did it at the same time,” Jet said, strolling towards Li. He smirked when he noticed the other boy still hadn’t sheathed his blades. The dao were hanging at Li’s sides, points towards the ground, and grasped tightly in sweaty hands.

“So you admit you did it too?” Li said, grinning victoriously.

“You say that like this was a competition,” Jet said, leaning into Li’s personal space. His grin widened as he watched the boy’s face go from blotchy, to stark white, then to brilliant red in a matter of seconds. “Was this a competition?” he added just because he could.

This time, Li’s entire body was shaking like a very powerful localized earthquake was occurring just beneath his feet. Well, Jet thought wryly, this was Ba Sing Se and earthbenders abounded so there very well could be a localized earthquake. He just doubted it.

Deciding he’d pushed Li’s buttons enough for the moment, Jet leaned back and chuckled. Reaching into his breast pocket, he pulled out a piece of straw and stuck it in his mouth. It wasn’t the wheat he preferred, but straw was certainly easier to get his hands on. No one missed a straw or two, but a single wheat grain? Oh yeah, they did.

“W-where do you even get those?” Li demanded, staring at the straw in exasperation.

“Here and there,” Jet replied. It wasn’t untrue. Straw was just about everywhere. “Here for instance?” he added, glancing around the warehouse.

Li followed Jet’s gaze and flushed when he noticed a few scattered piles of straw on the floor. With a weary sigh, Li clicked his dao blades together and slipped them back into their sheath. Before Jet could say something else, that fox leapt down from the warehouse rafters and landed perfectly on Li’s shoulders. Whatever Li said, Jet would never believe that creature as anything close to ‘just a
“Alright, alright,” he said, rolling his shoulders and holding out a hand. “I gotta hand it to you,” he flashed Li a cheeky grin, “you’re good with the blade.” Understatement. Talk about some uncommon skill. “I was wondering if you’d be interested in joining me for more of these little duels.”

Golden eyes flickered back to Jet’s earthen brown curious and wary. “I… Why?” he asked.

Jet studied the expression on Li’s face in fascination. This boy really did wear his feelings on his face. “You know,” he said without answering Li’s question, “just out of curiosity, can you lie?”

“Wha- Where did that- Why would you ask me something like that?” Li gasped, offense and confused shock written all over his face.

“Can you or can’t you?” Jet pressed, tucking his thumbs under his belt and shifted his weight.

“I- Well- Y-yes, I can lie bu-”

“So that’s a ‘no,’ then?” Jet said, an amused smile brightening his face.

Li’s mouth dropped open in offense. “Yes I can!”

Jet gave a low whistled. “Yeah, you definitely can’t,” he said, snickering.

Li stood there flushed and fuming, hands fisted by his sides. It was adorable and hilarious and was that not-fox laughing?! Creepy.

Golden eyes closed and Li’s shoulders rose and fell in a deep, steadying sigh. “Are you done teasing me?” he asked in a carefully calm voice.

“For now, yeah,” Jet chirped with a cheerful grin. Li groaned. “You said you couldn’t stay long,” he continued, ignoring Li’s annoyance, “so I’ll call it a night. Interested in joining me again tomorrow night? Same place, same time?”

Li hesitated, biting his lower lip in indecision. “I need to go somewhere tomorrow actually,” he said slowly. “But if I get back soon enough, then…” He shifted, unclenching his fists and brushing his sweaty palms against his pants. “Yes.”

Hook, line, and sinker.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow, Li,” Jet called, turning on his heel. He tossed a wave and playful wink over his shoulder just in time to see Li flush. He didn’t need to look to hear Li’s indignant squawk. That, Jet was certain everyone within a thirty yard radius could hear. It was adorable and Jet began mulling over potential ideas to get Li to squawk like that again.

There were way too many to choose from.

That- That- Ugh!

Li felt like he was going to explode from humiliation. His entire body burned, particularly his face, and his headache was back in full force. It felt like something was sealed inside of him and was just itching for a way to get out. It… hurt.
He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. In, hold, out. In, hold, out. The pressure eased taking the pounding in his temples with it. But the warmth didn’t fade away entirely, it still licked just beneath his skin like a candle flame. If a candle flame could burn beneath the skin.

When the headache also didn’t retreat entirely, Li pinched the bridge of his nose. The pounding was gone, but the dull thrum remained at the back of his mind. He probably should consider mentioning it to Ying. She would probably know who to ask or where to look for a healer they could afford.

It could just be a headache, or it could be linked to his memories. Anything that could potentially lead him to discovering who he was, no matter how remote the possibility, was worth considering at the moment.

Zenko shifted on his shoulder and Li sighed, walking over to where he left his bag. The sun was already set so curfew would be in a few more hours. Anyone who didn’t have special permission to be outside past curfew like healers, tended to either get caught or… vanish. Everyone knew the Dai Li were responsible for the disappearances, but no one spoke of it. It was just one of those unspoken truths.

Li absently reached up and scratched Zenko’s head, earning him a warbling purr. Her tails swished with pleasure, tickling his scarred cheek.

“Ready to go for a walk?” he murmured. She barked, pressing her fur against his ear and shaking herself out. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“You boys done then?” an elderly man asked, stepping into the warehouse. The lamplight from the streets lit the alleyway behind the man, outlining his bowed back and white beard. “I hope you didn’t leave too big of a mess,” he said, casting his brown eyes around the empty floor. “I spent the day cleaning up the place.”

“Y-yes,” Li said, tucking his hands into his tunic sleeves and hurrying out the door. “Thank you for letting us borrow it for a while,” he said, pausing to bow politely before he left.

The old man waved Li by. “As long as this place isn’t being used and I don’t have to clean up your messes, you boys are welcome to use it,” he said. “I might just sit in on your little practice session tomorrow.” He yawned. “Could help me stay awake.”

Li tried to smile past his confusion, but he was sure it didn’t come across as well as he’d prefer because the old man laughed at him.

“Don’t be like that,” the old man said. “When you reach my age, you’ll find out how fast just about anything tires you out.” He snorted, then hummed curiously when he noticed Zenko. “Interesting friend you have there,” he said. “Where’d you get it? I don’t think I’ve ever seen any animal like that for sale before.”

Bristling, Li frowned. But he kept a strict hold on his temper because Zenko was growling and he wasn’t going to lose her because some crazy old coot made her mad.

“No,” he said curtly. “She’s a girl. Second, I didn’t buy her, she’s free to come and go as she pleases. She’s also not an animal.”

The old man raised a disbelieving eyebrow at Li who held his ground. “Certainly looks like an animal to me,” he said.
“She’s not.”

A snort. “Alright then, boy,” the man said. “What is she if she’s not an animal?”

Oh. Well…

“She’s a fox,” Li said awkwardly, glancing away. He could too lie.

“Mm. And a… fox,” Li did not appreciate the way the old man said that, “is not an animal because…?”

Li walked right into that one. “A fox is animal,” Li admitted, his hands gripping his wrists nervously inside his sleeves, “but she isn’t an animal.”

The old man gave him a look and Li gulped, deliberately looking everywhere but the man. He could lie. He just couldn’t lie very well, apparently.

“Whatever you say, boy,” the elderly man said. “Off with you now. You’re too young to do nothing on a night like this. Get drunk, find a girl, and enjoy. Just be sure to be inside before curfew,” he said, wagging a finger at Li and laughing at the brilliant blush flooding the poor boy’s cheeks.

Desperate to get away from yet more teasing, Li skipped out of the warehouse and ran down they alleyway towards the street. There were quite a few people still outside, although most were either heading home or out to eat for the evening.

A crowd of young people strolled down the street laughing and talking boisterously as they made their way towards a restaurant further down. Zenko flicked her ears, tickling his cheek with her fur before hopping off his shoulder and running straight up the wall of the nearest building. The first time she did that, Li had to close his mouth, sit down, and rethink his existence.

There was just something unnatural about watching anything run right up the side of a vertical wall like gravity wasn’t a thing. He’d gotten used to it, but he couldn’t resist glancing up at her even now. It was a stark reminder that Zenko was a spirit in fox form, an entirely different creature from Li and Humans.

Biting back his mild discomfort, Li glanced up and down the street. Knowing Zenko would follow him in her own way, Li slipped into the crowd of youths. He matched their pace until he was close enough to the restaurant district, then he slipped away without being noticed. The alley between an old tea shop and the bright restaurant next door was dark enough to hide Li from the casual eye. Just to be sure, he cast a wary eye up at the rooftops for any sign of the Dai Li.

Nothing. He breathed a sigh of relief, and stepped behind the small tea shop. There were a couple windows on the nearby buildings, but none of them had a direct view of this particular spot. It wasn’t completely private, but it was as close as he was going to get given his circumstances.

Squatting by the back of the tea shop, Li began stripping off his long tunic. He pulled out a long sleeved gray shirt from his bag and pulled it on as quickly as he could. He tightened the black straps around the gray sleeves so they wouldn’t flap in the wind or catch on nails or anything.

Then he pulled out his blue and white mask. He ran his fingers over the smooth wood, feeling the tingle of something in the back of his mind. It wasn’t anything specific, just the sense that this mask was important. But every time he felt like he could just… touch it… it would vanish leaving him feeling lost and confused.
It hurt, but it was a hurt that he was becoming familiar with. He could live with it, had been living with it. He just hoped he wouldn’t have to live with it for much longer.

He heard a familiar warbling chirp from the roof of the tea shop behind him and sighed. He slipped on the mask, making sure it was secure before pulling up his hood and shouldering his dao sheath. After a careful glance around the alley, he tucked his bag with his usual tunic behind a bin and climbed up to the tea shop’s roof.

Zenko wagged her tails and smiled her foxy grin at him, her eyes open and shining like twin cerulean moons. It was an easy leap from the tea shop to the wall of the restaurant next door. The wood paneling near the windows as well as the stone and terra cotta of the building provided several handholds to ease his climb to the rooftop.

When he was finally on the restaurant’s roof, he took a moment to orient himself and appreciate the breeze carrying music, laughter, and muffled speech with it. Far ahead, looming tall and impenetrable was the Wall surrounding the Middle Ring where the Ba Sing Se University stood. Tonight’s trip was just reconnaissance to orient himself to the city. He wouldn’t be taking any risks if he could avoid it.

Besides, he had promised Ying he’d be back for dinner and he was hesitant to break his word. Ying may lecture him, but it was her quiet look of disappointment that hit him the hardest. For some reason, that look was familiar. Disappointment. Just the thought of the word brought a steady stream of guilt, despair, and, disturbingly, acceptance from the blackness that was his memories.

He knew disappointment. Knew it intimately. Either he’d been disappointed, or he’d been the disappointment. Either way, that single word affected him and while he wanted to regain his lost memories, he wasn’t eager to have the flood of emotion hinted at every time he heard the word ‘disappointment.’

Zenko brushed his ankle with her tails and Li closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. He focused his thoughts on the cool, night air, the distant sounds, the vague sense that someone was nearby, and the hair raising sense of Zenko at his feet. He could feel the pinpricks of warmth where the cook fires were and the street lamps and even one or two ovens from the restaurant next door. They teased him with their warmth, but he dismissed them. When he opened them again, he ran across the central beam of the building’s roof and leapt to the next roof with ease.

I didn’t take more than three roof jumps for Li to figure out that this was also something he knew. He could fight, he could climb trees, he wore masks, and he could roof jump. What was he in his past life? A thief? He hoped not.

Before too long, his thoughts meshed together and were brushed aside by the wind whistling by his mask. All that remained was his feet, the roofs, the wind, and Zenko guiding him to the wall. It was easy to lose himself up here. To forget who he was in a good way.

Up here, he wasn’t Li, the boy who had no memories before almost two weeks ago. Li, the boy who struggled at making the most basic pottery jug. Li, the boy who struggled to control his temper. Li, the boy who both wanted his memories back, but who was beginning to fear what those memories would reveal about himself. Li, the boy who was too afraid to let go.

Because if he let go, he might lose everything. Again.
“So, what’s he like?” Smellerbee asked, taking a seat at the table they were escorted to. “Besides panicking in the birthing room.”

Jet snickered but leaned across the table in excitement. “The guy can fight,” he said in a low voice, his eyes shining. “He uses dao and he can handle himself, even when I try to trip him up.”

Longshot lifted an eyebrow and Jet rolled his eyes.

“I didn’t hurt him,” Jet groaned. “I just tried to throw off his balance. It barely phased him.” He chewed on his straw as he studied the menu the owner of the tea shop had given him. “What’re you two gonna get?”

“Yes, what can I get you this fine night?” a skinny, stick of a man said.

The group looked up at the smiling man in an apron in mild surprise. “Who’re you?” Jet asked.

“I’m Pao,” the man replied, smiling broadly. “I’m the owner of this establishment.”

“Oh. Then ginseng, please,” Smellerbee said, glancing at Longshot who nodded in agreement.

Jet propped his cheek on his palm and sighed. “I need yerba mate,” he grumbled, glancing down at the menu. He wasn’t the best at reading, but his parents had taught him up until… Then he’d tried to keep up his lessons as one of the ways he remembered them by.

He jumped when Smellerbee smacked her hand on the table. “You are not going to have yerba mate,” she hissed. “You will be up the walls all freaking night and I will have to hurt you.”

A grin stretched across Jet’s face. “Aw, but you like me wired,” he said.

“When you’re going to fight, yeah. Not when we’re going to bed soon.” Smellerbee ran a hand through her messy brown hair, scratching behind her ear. “Besides, we have to get up early tomorrow and I don’t know about you, but I am looking forward to some good night’s sleep.”

“So,” Pao said, hesitantly glancing between the three, “two ginsengs and a yerba mate?”

Jet’s “Yes,” was overridden by Smellerbee’s “No!”

“He’ll have chamomile, please,” Smellerbee said, nodding to Pao who smiled awkwardly and ran into the kitchen.

“Chamomile?” Jet groaned. “Are you trying to make me fall asleep?”

“Yes.”

Jet folded his arms on the table and rested his chin on them, giving Smellerbee the stink eye. Unfortunately for him, she was completely unaffected. She even had the audacity to smirk at him. Grumbling in playful annoyance, Jet flicked the straw between his lips up and down at her. Her smirk just got bigger and Longshot’s expression softened too.

“Good evening,” an older man’s voice said, drawing the threesome’s gaze. He was short, probably shorter than Jet, and fat with a cheerful smile. His hair was gray and trimmed in a neat beard underneath his bright, contagious smile.

“I hope I didn’t make you wait too long,” he said, setting his tray of teacups down on the table. “Two ginseng,” he said, placing two teacups in front of Smellerbee and Longshot, “and one chamomile.” He placed the last cup in front of Jet. “Is there anything else I can get you?”
"No thank you," Smellerbee said. Jet mumbled unintelligibly and fiddled with his teacup handle.

"Oh dear," the old man said in concern. "Is something wrong with the tea?"

Smellerbee scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Ignore him," she said, waving dismissively at Jet. "He’s just upset I won’t let him have caffeine."

The concern melted from the old man’s face as he released a jolly belly laugh that brought a smile to everyone’s face. "Reminds me of my nephew," he said. "I had to tie him down once just to make him drink something that wasn’t caffeenated. Wouldn’t speak to me for a day but he slept well that night so I think it worked out for the best."

Jet pulled his straw out of his mouth and cackled. “Sounds like a handful,” he said. “I don’t even know this kid and I like him already.”

The old man’s face softened to something gentle and sad. “He is a handful,” he said kindly, “and prickly as a porcupinebear. But he tries.” His smile faded somewhat. “I miss him.”

Oh.

"I’m sorry," Jet said. “How did he die?"

Startled, the old man blinked at Jet in confusion. Then understanding dawning in his jolly light brown eyes and he smiled. “Oh no, my nephew isn’t dead,” he said. “He’s just... missing.”

Jet shared a knowing glance with his friends as the elderly tea server heaved a sigh. Missing. Right.

"We were on our way to Ba Sing Se when we...” the man hesitated, “had a disagreement.” He shook his head. “My nephew is smart and clever but he has a temper. Usually, if I leave him be for a while he cools down. But this time, I... He left.” The man rubbed his hands together sadly as if remembering the feel of his nephew’s hands.

“I followed him,” he continued quietly, “but lost his trail in an abandoned village.” He sighed. “I fear he may have gotten there and walked into the trap waiting for him like I did. I met some friends who helped me when I was wounded, but...” There were tears in his eyes and he sighed, tucking his hands back into his sleeves. But a small, hopeful smile was back on his face. “I saw him on the train into the city when I got off the ferry, but alas, he did not see me. Nevertheless,” his smile growing until his filled his face, “I have not lost faith that we will find each other again. Ba Sing Se is big, true, but never doubt my nephew’s ability to find trouble.” He chuckled. “Find trouble and my nephew will inevitably be nearby.”

Jet smiled. “So your trouble magnet nephew is in Ba Sing Se,” he said. “If that’s true, then I’m sure you’ll find him.”

"I certainly hope so,” the man said. “Sorry to burden you with an old man’s worries."

"Not to worry," Jet said. “We all need to vent sometimes. What with the w- lives we left behind being so rough. If you know what I mean.”

"Ah! Yes, yes,” the man said, glancing around nervously.

"Mushi! I need you!”

The old man’s shoulders slumped wearily. “Ah, a day’s work is never done,” he said. “My name is..."
Mushi. Give me a call if you need anything."

"No problem," Jet said. "Quick question: your nephew, what was his name?"

Mushi beamed proudly. "Li," he said. "A common name, but if you ever meet him you'll know what I mean when I say Li is not a common boy."

Li. What are the odds?

"I'll keep an eye out for anyone with that name," Jet said. "Sometimes family's all we've got." He ignored the subtle nudge of Smellerbee's foot beneath the table.

Mushi positively glowed. "Thank you," he said, taking Jet's hand and shaking it enthusiastically. It caught Jet off guard but in an amusing way.

"Just curious. Other than the name 'Li,' being a trouble magnet, and prickly as a cactus, does your nephew have any distinctive features I should be looking for?" Jet asked. "Green eyes? Brown hair? Tall? Short?"

Mushi hummed thoughtfully. "He's about your age," he said, rubbing his chin, "but not as tall as you. Although," his smile faded, "his most distinctive feature would be the scar on his face. Do not press him on it. It is... not something he enjoys talking about."

Scar. Li. Oh, no way. Li was a ridiculously common name. Everyone knew a Li. And this war had left scars on everyone. It could not be this easy.

Jet swallowed. "This... scar," he said, choosing his words with care, "is it..."

"I think you'll understand when I say it's a burn scar and leave it at that," Mushi said grimly.

No. Way.

"For a while, I feared he would never see out of that eye again, but my nephew is stubborn and determined." Mushi's smile returned, though it was nowhere near as bright as it had been. "But that's my nephew and I would not have him any other way. I grow more proud of him with each passing day." Mushi's light brown eyes the shade of dull amber lifted to Jet's. "If you see him, tell him... Tell him I'm proud of him and that I miss him."

"Mushi!"

The elderly tea server wilted. "Yes, yes, coming," he called, bowing politely to Jet and his friends before leaving.

Once Mushi was gone, Smellerbee kicked his foot a bit harder. "What was that about?" she hissed.

Jet put the straw back in his mouth and chewed in silence to give himself a chance to think. He pulled it out again to sip his chamomile tea.

"I think I know him," he murmured, setting his tea back down.

Smellerbee frowned. "Who?"

"Li." Jet met his friend's eyes with his own. "I think I know where Mushi's nephew is. Think 'Bee. Who do we know matches that description to the last detail?"

Smellerbee's mouth opened in a small 'o.' Then her brows dipped low over her eyebrows. "What's
Sharp as always. “He already has an uncle,” Jet said just loud enough for his two friends to hear. “And he’s never mentioned looking for anyone.”

“But you’re right,” Smellerbee said. “There can’t be many Lis out there with scars like his.”

Jet shook his head and said nothing. This... would need to be handled carefully.
Chapter Summary

In which Li is disconcerted by a kiln, makes a child's day, and scares a brat out of his skin. So far, so good.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for the delay in updating. Life got difficult and now I'm working on my NaNoWriMo project. That'll take up most of my attention during November, but I'm not letting this die. Promise.

Something was off. He wasn’t sure what exactly, just that it was. He stood glaring at the kiln as if expecting it to tell him what was wrong. It wouldn’t, no surprise. At least Zenko didn’t think he was crazy. She too stood staring at the kiln, her head cocked curiously. At least her eyes were still closed. If they opened, Li would probably run for the hills.

Interestingly enough, the children who were too young to apprentice under their parents or the other potters here were avoiding this particular kiln as well. Although, Li thought with the beginnings of what he just knew was a blush, that was probably due to him. He knew how dangerous his scar made him look when he glared. Even Than would sometimes think twice before approaching him when he got like this. Only Ying and Zenko seemed to be entirely unaffected.

Still, something about this kiln kept nagging at him. He felt like he should know what was wrong with it, but, for the life of him, he had no earthly idea. He was wracking his brain for any rational explanation and coming up empty. It was driving him insane.

Zenko brushed his clothed leg with her tail, startling him out of his thoughts. Someone must be coming to check on him. Swallowing back his growing frustration, Li straightened and turned his head to his visitor.

Li took in the dark brown hair speckled by gray over stern green eyes and winced. As the son of the pottery guildmaster, Cheng wasn’t the friendliest man in Ba Sing Še, but he was fair. Don’t do something stupid and you typically had nothing to worry about. Li grimaced. Staring at a kiln probably counted as stupid.

“Is something wrong, Li?” Cheng asked calmly, tucking his clay covered hands inside his sleeves.

Pressing his lips together, Li let his shoulders droop and returned his gaze to the shut kiln door. “No,” he replied.

“I see.”

Instead of focusing on Cheng’s approaching footsteps, Li focused his attention on the kiln. There. He could still feel it, the wrongness. As if something wasn’t where it should be. Or too much of
something was where it shouldn't be. What was that something?

“Then perhaps you could enlighten me as to why you insist upon staring at the kiln like it will bite you,” Cheng asked, and Li could just hear the raised eyebrow in that voice. Curious, but little patience for nonsense.

Zenko deliberately sat on his foot. Well, if that wasn’t a command than Li was a waterbender.

“Something’s wrong with it,” he said, without preamble.

Cheng tilted his head slightly. “And why do you think that?” he asked. “It appears to be working correctly.”

Which was true. As far as Li understood the inner workings of kilns, it was working correctly. But it wasn’t really the kiln that had something wrong with it so much as there was something wrong inside the kiln where all that heat-

Heat. He was feeling heat.

“It’s not the kiln, exactly,” Li said, choosing his words with care. How best to describe this? “It’s the heat. It’s not… where it should be, I guess.”

Li crouched in front of the door, staring at it and feeling the heat. It rolled off the kiln in waves that rippled the air and made the inside glow red hot as it baked the clay pottery within. Narrowing his eyes, Li could feel the heat flowing around each jug, cup, plate, and vase inside. These were mostly apprentice-made pottery pieces so they weren’t as smooth or perfectly formed as the masters’. Li could feel the imperfections as the heat roiled around them, disturbed by the indentations and irregularities, before returning to the flow it desired.

“What do you mean it’s not where it should be?” Cheng asked, his voice breaking into Li’s concentration. “Is there a crack in the kiln?”

Worry. If there was a crack in the kiln’s outer shell, that would cause a lot of problems. But no, it wasn’t that, so Li shook his head.

“Inside,” he said.

Zenko moved so she stood still, tails down, and her head cocked, ready to pounce. Her ears twitched, brushing Li’s knee, and he dipped his chin in silent agreement. He could sense the heat seeping into the clay within. But now that he knew it was heat he was sensing, he could follow the heat’s movements.

Heat was seeping into weaknesses too small to be detected by the naked eye. The potters themselves probably wouldn’t have detected the weaknesses in the clay until it was too late. Even masters made mistakes, after all. But how many…? Ah, three.

“Three,” he murmured and Zenko flicked her ear in agreement.

“Three what?” Cheng asked, a faint hint of frustration slithering into his words. Just like the heat was slithering into the infinitesimal cracks in the clay to-

Crack!

There went one. “Two,” Li murmured. Cheng said nothing. He didn’t need to.
Cra-crack!

And there went the other two. With that, the sense of wrongness in the kiln faded. Rolling his shoulders, Li stood, brushing the dirt from his pants and long, dark brown tunic. He held out his hands for Zenko to hop into and waited for her to settle before turning to Cheng.

The man’s brown eyes were narrowed and his mouth was slightly open in surprise. Li really didn’t want to talk about it. Not like he could explain it, after all. With a polite bow of apprentice to master, Li strode out of the courtyard to where Ying and Than were working on their respective wheels.

Zenko yawned noisily and bumped his arm with her nose before resting her head vertically against him. He felt his own lips twitch up in quiet amusement.

“You’re so weird,” he muttered to her. She made a warbling chirp, grinning her foxy grin and he huffed a laugh. “How is that even comfortable?” Another warble and his lip twitch became a small smile.

The sun was reaching its daily zenith so he should probably head to the train station now if he was going to spend a decent amount of time at the university’s library.

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Every time he rode the train, he was always pleasantly surprised by the smooth ride. It gave him the chance to lean back against the open window and let the wind whip his face. Other than the initial ride into the city after leaving the ferry, Li had ridden the train a handful of times. It was useful for grocery runs and errands with Ying and Than on guild business. This time, he was riding it of his own accord.

He’d had to ask for today off from his pottery work. He wasn’t looking forward to failing at forming another jug from clay with his clumsy hands. It had taken him three full days to finally accept that he just wasn’t cut out for pottery. He didn’t have the patience for it and his callused hands simply weren’t delicate enough for the detail work. They were made to handle his dao. He knew that now. He just wasn’t sure if he was ready to accept that fact.

At least asking off had gone smoothly. Although he still wasn’t sure how he felt about the way Cheng looked at him this morning. It made him feel out of place; well, more so than usual. It almost felt like Cheng was… afraid of him. But why would that be? Li couldn’t remember doing anything to earn the guildmaster’s son’s ire.

Why him?

“Um, excuse me?”

Looking down, Li saw a pair of bright green eyes in a young face staring up at him with wary hopefulness.

“How can I pet her?” the little girl asked, pointing to Zenko.

Li blinked, glancing down at Zenko. She flicked her ear at him and eased her nose out to nudge the child’s finger. The young green eyes widened and locked on the fox spirit. Zenko licked the child’s finger and Li knew he wouldn’t be left alone for the rest of the ride.

Strangely, that didn’t bother him for once.
The University of Ba Sing Se was definitely busier than he expected. It also looked deceptively larger. Middle Ring citizens and more than a few Upper Ring citizens bustled between buildings or lingered in the shade of trees on the patches of grass on either side of the main quad. Li stared. It was one thing to see it at night, it was another thing entirely to see it in daylight.

Those were actual trees and grass. Li hadn’t seen this much green in one place since arriving in Ba Sing Se. He didn’t realize he’d missed it until now. The temptation to just lay down in the grass and take a nap was almost too much for him to handle. It reminded him of turtleducks and…

What?

Gone.

Suddenly the greenery wasn’t so interesting. Biting his lip, Li strode confidently into the quad, ignoring the curious stares. They weren’t really aimed at him anyway so much as the kitsune lazing on his shoulders, tails swaying with every one of his steps, and ears flicking every which way. They’d probably never seen a regular fox or fox spirit before.

If Li hadn’t just known he’d seen one before and Zenko hadn’t latched onto him, then he’d probably be staring too. But he’d grown used to Zenko and her hair-raising presence. It was understandable that her presence would make such a fuss.

That didn’t mean he appreciated being the center of attention. He already got enough attention because of his scar. He didn’t want more. Soft fur brushed his scarred cheek and a wet nose pressed against his other temple. She didn’t care. He was hers. She liked him, scar and all. Let them stare. She could stare right back. Some of the tension eased from his shoulders and the frown faded to a more neutral expression at her gesture.

Then everything faded into awe as he stared and stared and stared. The Ba Sing Se University library was huge. Shelves upon shelves lined the walls of the buildings and extended in broken lines from the front of the room to the back. Tables and chairs dotted with chairs and unlit, glass encased candles filled the front section of the building. It wasn’t a lot of sitting room really, but it looked big.

Windows lined the top of the walls by the ceiling, casting light onto the floor. Other windows lower down broke the pattern of bookcases on the walls with light and a cushioned bench for further reading. Li would bet there were other, smaller sitting areas further in, but he couldn’t see them.

Swallowing nervously, he stepped inside the library, careful to shut the door quietly behind him. He didn’t want any undue attention. Striding down the center aisle between tables, Li sighed.

“So,” he murmured under his breath to Zenko, “any idea where to start?”

She swished her tails and cocked her head in consideration.

“You do know animals aren’t allowed in the library, right?”

Both Li and Zenko turned to the person who’d spoken to them. It was a young lady who might have been pretty if she wasn’t wearing so much makeup. As she was, she looked like she belonged in the theatre not in a library. And Li would eat his shoes if that hairpin wasn’t worth more than his, Ying’s, and Than’s pay for the entire week and then some.
Upper Ring people were really something else.

Zenko batted his cheek with her tail and he agreed. Might as well ignore her. Turned his pale gold gaze back to the bookcases, he read the posted categories. It seemed each row of bookcases was for a single category.

“Excuse me.”

If he wanted to figure out why no one could talk about the war going on outside the Walls or what could be causing his headache without paying for any old healer, then he should probably consider the history or science categories. If he only knew where those sections were.

“Excuse me!”

Zenko turned her head to the right and Li obediently followed her lead. She was a Knowledge Seeker for Wan Shi Tong, after all. If anyone was familiar with libraries and classification systems, it would be Zenko.

“Hey, you!”

Someone grabbed his sleeve, halting his movement. Biting back an angry retort, Li settled for glaring at the person who’d stopped him. It was male student who was shorter than Li and who wore a pair of round spectacles. Those glasses definitely cost a fortune. The student’s haircut was also a bit odd. It bared all of the student’s forehead not hidden by a green patterned hat before tumbling back in a jet black braid. That must be the style for the Middle and Upper Ring citizens. The rich were definitely something else.

The student flinched when he noticed Li’s scar, but refused to stare at it for long. Instead, he looked at Li’s other eye and frowned. “Animals aren’t allowed in the library,” he said.

Li raised an eyebrow. Yes, that girl had already told him.

“You need to leave,” the student said, tugging on Li’s sleeve.

Narrowing his good eyes, Li yanked his sleeve from the stranger’s grasp and tucked his arms into his sleeves.

The student bristled. “Look sir.” Oh, so Li was a ‘sir’ now and not a ‘you.’ That was a promotion, maybe. “You can either leave your animal outside,” he pointed at Zenko, “or I’ll have to call the Guard and have you escorted off campus.”

Li glared, feeling a flash of pleasure when the student flinched. “She’s not an animal,” he growled.

The boy flushed in indignation. “You think I’m stupid?” he demanded.

“Yes,” Li answered simply.

The boy’s mouth dropped open. “I am most definitely not stupid,” he said, sounding utterly offended. “Unlike some people.”

Li blinked, feeling hot fury surge to the surface, burning him from the inside out. Every instinct raged at him to vent, but a soothing touch of a wet nose and brush of fur helped him keep his tenuous control. Well, if he couldn’t yell…

“I’m stupid?” Li said in a deadpan voice.
“Yes!” Did the brat really just stamp his foot?

Li ran his eyes up and down the student’s body, unimpressed. “At least I can tell the difference between an animal and a Spirit,” he said.

Li felt a tingling sensation on the back of his neck and shoulders at the same time all the blood in the student’s face drained. Zenko must have opened her eyes. He fought the smug smile begging to paste itself on his face with supreme effort.

Then Zenko bounded off his shoulders and ran on padded feet across the bookcases towards some unseen goal. Li rolled his eyes at her theatrics before hurrying after her. A quick glance over his shoulder had him snickering at the still frozen student behind him. Zenko’s inhuman gaze had been enough proof. She hadn’t needed to run horizontally across the bookcases as if gravity was optional.

But that brat’s dumbstruck expression had definitely been worth it.
Li slowed down when Zenko finally stopped, perched on a large book that protruded from the bookcase amidst a row of scrolls. Her tail swished as she regarded a book on the row just below her. Eventually, she opened her mouth, bit down on the book’s leather bound cover, and tugged it out of its slot. Satisfied, she hopped down into Li’s waiting arms.

Li took the offered book in one hand while Zenko pawed her way up his shirt so she sat on his shoulder, her tails brushing his back. The leather binding was simple but sturdy with the words *The Art of Glass* pressed into the stiff, front cover. Glassblowing?

Frowning, Li looked at his companion incredulously. Zenko tossed her head and grinned, proud of her work. Li rolled his eyes and looked back down at the book, flipping it open and studying the pages. The letters were printed in rectangular sections more or less in the center of each page. Curious, he continued to turn the pages. Each page was nearly identical to the last.

There was no wavering due to the author’s aching muscles, no wandering or uneven lines of text, and each symbol was exactly the same every time it appeared. There was no uniqueness to the lettering from the writer’s handwriting style. There was no handwriting style at all. It was almost as if someone had created each symbol before hand and simply placed them in any given order to make the words and sentences on the pages.

Perhaps they did. This was the Earth Kingdom after all. Who was to say earthbenders hadn’t figured out how to create each symbol using their bending rather than by skilled, artisan hands? Pity that. Bending was a useful tool, but that was all it was, in Li’s opinion. A tool. It could be artful, but it was still a tool, a means to an end. To give up an entire art form for the sake of convenience was depressing.

Oh, pictures. At least these appeared to be hand drawn. This one was of a man blowing into a long pipe from which a bulb of hot glass grew from the other end. The attention to detail was impressive.

Still, why did Zenko get this particular book for him?

With a grimace, Li leaned against the bookcase, disturbing a few scrolls, and continued to skim the
pages. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for. Hopefully he would know it when he saw it. Otherwise, this would have been a completely wasted trip to the library.

A turned the page and another illustration caught his eye. A woman stood by what appeared to be a kiln or flaming stove of some sort and throwing fire into it. Firebending. She was firebending. Not very well, granted. Her form was off. Her hands were cupped rather than held flat with palms out and her stance was too grounded. Her feet were too far apart and she was too stiff. Although, that could be due to the art style, less so with the woman’s expertise but…

Li blinked, snagging those thoughts fiercely and clinging to them before they could slip away. Firebending. He knew it. He recognized it. He knew the form the woman was trying to use, but he knew the correct form. Could… Could he…?

He held out a hand and… What? What was he supposed to do? Did benders feel their element? Did they visualize it? Was it like blood pulsing through a bender’s veins to the beat of their heart? Obviously a bender could manipulate their element, but how? Was Li a bender?

He couldn’t feel anything. Maybe he wasn’t a bender. But he knew the forms. He knew he knew the forms. He knew he could do the forms. Why would he know the forms but not be a bender?

Hesitantly, Li went over every single firebending form he could think of. It wasn’t as many as he thought, unfortunately. He could only remember five full firebending forms, nothing else. But the more he thought about the forms, analyzing them, he realized that even with no fire involved, they were still effective for offense and defense. He could even approximate those five forms with his dao. Perhaps that was how and why he learned those forms in the first place.

But that would mean he was… That he was...

A wet nose pressed against his scarred temple, soft fur brushing his skin, and a low warbling purr rumbled right by his ear. He blinked, startled when he noticed his hands were shaking. He closed the book and clutched it to his chest, focusing his mind and body on breathing. In, hold, out. In, hold, out.

Zenko had said it before, more than once actually. Fire. She called him a child of Fire. He was Fire Nation. He was the enemy. Ying. Than. They knew. They knew. And they said nothing. Why?

They said nothing. They did nothing either. They didn’t shun him or push him away. They didn’t watch their step when he was near. They allowed him to stay close, be present for Hope’s birth, and even watch Hope when they were busy. They trusted him. They trusted him even though he was Fire.

Why?

Why was he Fire? Why couldn’t he remember being Fire? Why couldn’t he remember his name? Why was he here in Ba Sing Se and no one was raising the alarm? Why was-

Blue.

:Fire:

He flinched but couldn’t look away from those endless eyes. When did Zenko leave his shoulder?

:Fire is what it is. It burns. That does not make it evil. It does not make you evil. You are Fire. You are what you are. You burn, brightly.:
But… He didn’t want to burn. He cared for Ying and Than and little Hope. Tiny, precious, helpless Hope. He never wanted to hurt them.

:What makes you think you will?:

Fire burns.

:It also warms, cooks, aids in art like glassblowing and pottery.: 

It melted half of his face off.

Bushy tails swished suddenly, batting the bookcase Zenko sat on and raising a cloud of dust that made Li sneeze. He shook his head and caught pure, glowing blue eyes once more.

:Fire is life! It burns, it fights, it spreads, and it is essential. You are Fire, Li. You burn like a beacon in the dark. You gave me some of your Fire the night we met and returned to me that which is precious without question. What evil person would do that?:

Blue swallowed his vision. He was drowning. He couldn’t blink or breathe or think. There was just the blue and Zenko’s soothing presence and gentle, powerful voice in his mind, overwhelming his senses.

:You blaze, Li. Fire burns, it also destroys. It is the choice of the user how it will be used. Just as Water heals and drowns, and Earth nurtures and crushes, and Air whistles and batters. All living things have pieces of every element within them. You just happen to have more Fire than the others. Just as I have more Spirit.: 

Spirit?

He blinked, dumbfounded by the loss of the blue. He staggered, unsteady from the exchange. His head was pounding. Wincing, he pressed his free hand against his temple. It seemed he would have to suffer through yet another headache that would sap his strength. What he would give for a good cup of tea.


Gone.

Zenko whined, her wet tongue swiping up his uninjured cheek. Surprised, Li moved his hand from his temple to his cheek. While he was fond of Zenko’s shows of affection, he wasn’t fond of being slobbered on.

And he might have offended the fox spirit if the disdainful sniff was anything to go by. He didn’t mean anything by it, honest. He just didn’t particularly like getting wet. Water wasn’t friendly.

Humming thoughtfully, Li considered the book in his hands once more. He knew the library wouldn’t let him keep it. He was from the Lower Ring. They wouldn’t trust him to bring it back.

He looked up at the empty gap where the book belonged and grimaced. It was high above his head and naturally Zenko was upset with him so she wasn’t going to be any help. In fact, probably just to rub it in, the kitsune jumped daintily off the shelf and sat on the stone floor by his feet. Muttering to himself, Li looked down the aisle to his left and right. He was alone as far as he could see.

There was no ladder. Of course. Earthbenders probably just used the stone floor to move up and
down the tall bookcases. Ugh. Heaving a sigh, Li set the book on the shelf in front of him, grabbed the shelf above that, and hauled his body up to the next level. It was easy, if a bit awkward. Grabbing the book, he pulled himself up and plopped it on its rightful shelf, nudging it back into place with his fingertips.

He landed lightly on the floor with a satisfied hum and glanced down at Zenko. She sniffed at him.

“You’re so ornery,” he mumbled.

She smacked his ankle with her tails. He did his best to bite back a snicker.

A shadow flashed in the corner of his good eye and he turned his head to catch it. Nothing. Frowning, Li studied the top of the bookcase. He may not have the best vision in his left eye, but his right was perfectly fine. He knew what he saw.

He was still staring fixedly at the place where he knew he’d seen something… when paws landed firmly on his left shoulder. He hunched forward out of habit so Zenko could sprawl across his shoulders, her head and front paws resting on his right shoulder and her back paws and tails twitching on his left. She licked his cheek again and he sighed, giving in to her urging and walking away. But not without one last glance at the spot above the bookcase.

He knew what he saw. People didn’t normally walk on top of bookcases, after all.

They passed that student with the odd haircut and expensive glasses again. Li didn’t bother hiding his smirk when the student’s face paled at the sight of Zenko on Li’s shoulders. The girl was nowhere to be seen. He supposed that was a good thing.

A steady pulse thumped the inside of his head and Li’s smirk slipped. He really would need to do something about these headaches soon. He didn’t want to cause trouble for Ying and Than. They had enough to worry about with little Hope. Which meant he would have to find a healer and check their prices. Or indulge in a good cup of tea and hope that worked.

His purse wasn’t full enough for both, so he would have to make a decision. He had the day off but that didn’t mean he could afford to dawdle. It would take time to locate a tea shop or a medicinal shop, travel there either by foot or by train, then indulge. So it would be best if—UFF!

“Oh, um, sorry,” he mumbled, ducking his head and moving around the person. Child. Oh. Oops.

“Hey, wait a sec.”

Oh Agni. Why him?

He paused, looking back at the unfortunate person he’d stumbled into like an idiot and waited for the usual verbal dressing down. It never came. Instead, the child—a girl, he realized—stood staring in his general direction with an odd expression on her face. Why wasn’t she looking at… oh. She was blind. Well, now he felt stupid and rude.

...and she still wasn’t saying anything. Li shifted his feet awkwardly.

“Oh, um, sorry?” he asked. Probably not the best thing to say, but he was a little clueless right now.

“Hey, wait a sec.”

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...and she still wasn’t saying anything. Li shifted his feet awkwardly.

“Oh, are you okay?” he asked. Probably not the best thing to say, but he was a little clueless right now.

The girl tilted her head, as if listening to something only she could hear. She probably was. After a moment, she pointed right at Li and said, “What’s on your back?”
Li blinked, taken aback by the question. He glanced at Zenko, who looked sightlessly back at him, then back at the little girl. “How do you know there’s something on my shoulders?” he asked, genuinely curious.

A bright grin spread across the girl’s face as she crossed her arms and puffed up her chest. “I can feel the way you’re leaning,” she declared.

“What?” Intelligent, Li. Brilliant response. The girl wiggled her toes and huh, Li didn’t notice she was barefoot before. She was probably an earthbender then.

“And I may have overheard a few of those guys,” she gestured over her shoulder with her thumb at a bunch of students who were obviously staring at them, “talking about some weirdo who brought an animal,” -Li tensed, keeping his frustrated anger in check with a tight grip- “into the library.” She paused. “So what ‘cha got on your shoulder, Short Fuse?”

Li bristled indignantly. “I’m not short,” he grumbled, crossing his arms in annoyance. “And she’s not an animal. Honestly, you’d think university students would know better.”

“She?” the girl asked. “She’s a girl?”

“Yeah.” Li glanced at Zenko again. Hesitantly, he squatted down so the fox spirit on his shoulders was at the girl’s eye level. “She’s a kitsune,” he said. “You can pet her, if you want. She doesn’t bite. Usually.”

Zenko chirped indignantly, nipping his ear in playful punishment, earning her a shy smile. She grinned, flashing her foxy teeth and leaned her head towards the girl, sniffing hopefully. Li waited patiently while the girl reached out and ran her hands over Zenko’s gray-black fur.

“What’s a kitsune?” the girl asked curiously. “It sounds like a Fire Nation word.”

Lit stiffened. It did? ‘Kitsune’ was a… He gulped. All this time he’d been calling Zenko… And no one told him. Fire. He was Fire and no one told him!

Maybe they thought he knew. But he hadn’t.

A sharp cackle from next to his ear jolted him out of his spiraling panic attack and back to the present. He swallowed over his dry throat and stuttered, “Uh, I guess so. It’s… She’s a fox spirit.”

The girl’s milky white, unseeing eyes grew wide.

“She’s kind of like you, actually,” Li added, hoping to dispel the girl’s growing fear. Putting arrogant idiots in their place was one thing, scaring children was something else entirely. He had no desire to scare children. He did that already with his face. Biting back his discomfort, he offered a tentative smile. The girl may not be able to see it, but he had no doubt she could hear it in his voice when he said, “She doesn’t see with her eyes either.”

The girl’s blind eyes bugged. It was… actually kind of adorable, in a weird sort of way.

“What does she ‘see’ with?” the girl asked.

Err. Well, Li kind of walked right into that one. He scratched his short black hair awkwardly. “I… don’t actually know,” he admitted. “I never asked. I figure, it’s not my business. If she’s fine the way she is, then I’m fine.”

Zenko brushed her three tails against his cheek and pulled her snout away from the girl’s hands to
nuzzle him. Of course she was fine the way she was. She was perfection itself, didn’t Li know?

Do not scoff.

“Huh. She really likes you.”

Li turned back to the girl, feeling his cheeks warm. “Y-yeah. I like to think she does.”

Zenko made a loud, cackling sound and Li had the distinct impression she was crowing her appreciation for him. Or laughing at him. Knowing Zenko, it could very well be both. He wouldn’t put it passed her. Sly fox.

“I’m Toph Bei Fong,” the girl declared, thrusting out her hand towards Li and holding it expectantly.

Caught off guard, Li blinked before hesitantly taking her hand in his and shaking it. “Li.”

“Li what?” Toph asked.

...

“Just Li,” he replied.

“It’s nice to meet you, Li,” Toph said, grinning proudly. That grin looked suspiciously like Zenko’s. “So, what ‘cha doing in Ba Sing Se?”

Li shrugged. “Escaping the w-”

He broke off abruptly when he felt Zenko tense, her hackles rising and a growl vibrating deep in her throat. He had never known her to act that way before. He took the warning seriously. He followed the kitsune’s unseeing gaze to a strange woman dressed in green and cream, her long brown hair hanging freely from a simple, green wooden hair clip on the top of her head. Her eyes were light brown and her smile was terrifying.

“There you are!” the woman said, her eerie smile remaining undisturbed. “You should not wander off, Toph. You should stay with your group.”

“I’m fine, by myself,” Toph said, crossing her arms in what Li highly suspected was a huff.

“Be that as it may, you should come back with me and rejoin your friends,” the woman said. “The library of Ba Sing Se is a wonderful place. So many books and scrolls. I’m sure you can find something to enjoy.”


Did… Did Toph just… Li snorted before he could stop himself. And Toph heard it and grinned that foxy grin.

The strange woman turned her nerve-wracking smile on Li and he suddenly wanted badly to be anywhere else. Anywhere else. Zenko bared her teeth and folded her ears back, her growl sending chills down his spine. Li would rather have Zenko’s chills any day. Anything but that Agni damned smile.

Something was wrong with that woman. Something about her made Li sick to his stomach. It was like she was all twisted up and-
As quickly as the smile locked on him, it returned to Toph.

“Come now,” the woman said. “Let us join your friends.”

Toph groaned dramatically. “This place is too stuffy for my taste,” she grumbled. “Hey, Short Fuse.”

“I’m not short,” Li said in a deadpan voice.

Toph hummed. “Yeah, not one of my best nicknames, I’ll give you that,” she said. “I’ll think of a better one for when we meet again.”

Li smiled wanly. “Ba Sing Se is huge,” he said. “I doubt we’ll see each other again.”

“You doubt my abilities?” Toph gasped, smacking her chest. “I’ll have you know, I’m the best earthbender in the world. I like you. And I like your friend there. I want to pet her again. So I’ll find you, Li,” she thrust out her finger, and ended up hitting Li right in the nose, not that she cared, “and yeah, I’ll see you again.”

With that, Toph waved and left with the creepy woman. Li stayed where he was, staring cross-eyed at his nose where Toph had smacked it with her finger. He rubbed it before standing and watching the girl leave.

He really didn’t like seeing Toph walk next to that woman. She just… Everything about her made Li’s insides scream and writhe in disgust.

Narrowing his eyes, Li tucked his hands into his sleeves and turned away. He should probably head back to the train station. He couldn’t afford any medicinal or tea shops in the Middle Ring, but he might be able to in the Lower Ring. Besides, if he left now, he might be able to snag a treat for Zenko before returning to Ying and Than’s apartment for the night.

Maybe he would even see Jet. Maybe Jet knew of a good tea shop. He stopped and mulled that thought over in his mind. Naw. No way.
“You!”

Li tensed, his eyes darting up to the doorway where the person who shouted stood. It took him a second before he recognized her.

“You!”

Zenko made a cackling sound and swished her tails in amusement. Li flushed and shot her a disgruntled glare. Hey. He never got the woman’s name on the ferry. It wasn’t his fault, he huffed indignantly.

“You’re the boy from the ferry,” the woman said, striding across the waiting area of the medical shop. “What are you doing here?”

Now that Li wasn’t in the middle of fighting down a panic attack, he was able to get a better look at the woman who had acted as Ying’s makeshift midwife on the ferry. She was taller than Ying with hair that was almost black except for the gray at the roots. Her face wasn’t young, but it wasn’t necessarily old either. Her eyes were a stern green that flashed with energy despite the crows feet and wrinkles beginning to form on her face.

Li straightened his back, snorting in amusement when Zenko had to adjust her position to maintain her balance. “I was just curious about the price,” he said. “I- Thank you for helping Ying through the birthing,” he said, bowing politely. “I didn’t know your name so we couldn’t find you to thank you before now.”

The woman hummed thoughtfully, placing her hands on her hips. “It’s Ruolan,” she replied, her lips quirking upwards. “You’re welcome for the service. I may not be a midwife by training, but I know my way around a birthing room if I have to. You did well yourself once you stopped panicking.” She grinned slyly. “First time watching a birthing, was it?”

“Li,” he answered, fighting down a shameful flush. “And, as far as I know, yes.”
Ruolan snorted. “Believe me, you would remember if it wasn’t,” she teased.

He highly doubted that.

“So,” she continued, “interested in pricing, are you? For what exactly? Also,” she nodded to Zenko still perched on Li’s shoulders, “you do know pets aren’t allowed in here.”

Zenko sniffed disdainfully and Li tried very hard not to roll his eyes. “She’s not my pet,” he grumbled. “And technically,” he stepped back out of the doorway so he stood in the afternoon sunlight, “I’m not inside.”


“How about this visit for you or for your aunt?” Ruolan asked.

“Me, actually,” Li said. “Ying’s doing well. Hope is driving her to distraction, but she enjoys it.” He cleared his throat and looked away. “She misses sleeping a full night, though.”

Ruolan cackled. “I bet she does,” she said, grinning widely. “Well, first visits are typically cheaper,” she said. “But, to be completely honest, I don’t think you could afford it with that purse of yours.”

Li sighed. He wasn’t really surprised, but it was disappointing to hear. “How much would it normally cost?” he asked.

“Five copper for the first visit, then a silver for every visit after that,” Ruolan replied.

Ah, yes. He could afford the first visit, but not the following ones. Better to save what he had for later in case things got worse. Or in case Ying or Hope needed it.

“This headache of yours,” Ruolan said suddenly, studying him curiously, “does it come on suddenly or fade in and out?”

“It’s always there,” Li said carefully after a moment to get his thoughts together. “Like background noise. It will get strong suddenly, but it usually fades back quickly enough. Most of the time.”

“And it’s lasted for how long?” Ruolan pressed, a frown working its way onto her face.

Since he first woke up with no memory.

“For a little over a week now,” Li said aloud.

Ruolan hummed. Without waiting for permission, she took hold of Li’s chin and turned his head side to side, studying his face closely. A faint blush bloomed in Li’s cheeks as she examined his red and brown scar. Eventually, she let go and Li tried not to rub his chin gingerly. He didn’t particularly like being manhandled. Ruolan had a strong grip.

“I know you can’t afford to pay me right now,” she said with a sigh, “but I don’t mind giving you some suggestions free of charge. To start with, find a place where you can get a full night’s sleep undisturbed. That should help.”

“Oh, well, I live with Ying and Than,” Li said, scratching his short black hair awkwardly. “And Hope has, well, she has strong lungs.”
Ruolan cackled. “After hearing her mother, I’m not surprised. Alright then, I suggest the rooftop or visiting a friend’s for the night,” she said easily. “A good cup of herbal tea never hurt either. Green tea, cinnamon, or ginger tea would be your best choice. But chamomile will help you sleep if you don’t like or can’t afford the other choices. There’s a good place in the restaurant district called Pao’s Family Tea Shop. The tea there is fantastic.”

“I’ll do that,” Li said gratefully. He bowed at the waist and turned to leave when Ruolan called to him.

“Li,” she said, straightening, “in a few days, if none of those work, then come back and I’ll take a look at you.”

Well, at least his purse was still full, Li thought as he waved in acknowledgement, even if it wouldn’t be for much longer. He trudged through the Lower Ring taking in the sights and smells and tolerating the numerous odd looks Zenko got for sitting on his shoulders. She was so weird. He loved her.

Turning the next corner he paused, staring at the little tea shop nestled between a couple restaurants. This must be it, Pao’s Family Tea Shop. Wait. Huh, what do you know. This was the same tea shop he’d hidden behind last night before adventuring through the city by rooftop. For such an enormous city, it really was rather small.

Green tea, cinnamon, or ginger, Ruolan had said. Hopefully one of those options would be good and affordable. Ruolan swore by this place. Even said it was the best in all of Ba Sing Se. Li wouldn’t know, he wasn’t exactly a tea connoisseur, but hopefully this little place lived up to expectation.

When he pushed the door in, he was greeted by a common room lit by dim sunlight filtering in through the wooden slats over the windows facing the street and a few lanterns hung on the walls. Guests sat at the long, communal tables talking, laughing, and drinking tea giving the cozy room a welcome ambience. It was actually rather nice. So far.

Until someone gasped. Li winced, already aware of what had caught the stranger’s attention. His scar was anything but subtle, after all. Neither was Zenko, even with her dark fur.

“Is that your pet?”

“Uh… What?” he stuttered, caught off guard by the unexpected question. On his shoulder, Zenko sneezed. Oh dear Agni. Did no one recognize a Spirit when they saw one? “No, she’s not my pet,” he said with a heavy sigh.

Why did he even bother? It wasn’t like anyone would believe him.

“Oh, she’s not?” the girl said, tilting her head in innocent confusion.

“It’s a long story,” he muttered, reaching up to scratch Zenko’s ear which were twitching irritably.

“Come sit with me,” the girl said with a smile, gesturing to the bench next to her. “I like stories.”

Li didn’t like stories. Not this kind, anyway. He was getting tired of repeating himself. Still, he wasn’t going to turn down a perfectly good spot to sit in the busy room.

“Thank you,” he said, taking the offered seat.

Zenko swished her tails and curled around his neck so her head pressed against the underside of his
It tickled but it was comfortable, however odd that may sound.

“I’m Jin,” the girl said, brushing one of her two tails of dark brown hair over her shoulder. “This place has the best tea in Ba Sing Se.”

“So I’ve heard,” Li said, absently petting Zenko’s back just where her neck met her skinny, fluffy body. She made a soft purring warble sound of pleasure and snuggled closer, bumping his chin with her snout. “I’m Li, by the way. Do you know if they have cinnamon tea here?”

“It’s nice to meet you, Li. They have just about everything you can think of and a few you can’t,” she said, laughing merrily. “Especially since the new tea maker started working here.”

“A new tea maker?” he asked.

Jin nodded, humming an affirmative. “He’s a nice old man,” she said. “Laughs a lot and makes the best tea. He memorizes people’s favorite teas too.”

“How much does one cup cost?” Li asked hesitantly. Please don’t be expensive.


Li heaved a sigh of relief. He could afford a cup or two then, good. He’d save the rest to buy a treat for Zenko and maybe a toy for Hope.

“Does she always sit on your shoulders like that?” Jin asked, staring at Zenko who was grinning her foxy, toothy grin and positively preening from all the positive attention she was getting.

“Most of the time,” Li said, feeling a fond smile work its way onto his face as he continued to scratch right where Zenko liked it. “When she’s not chasing something or sleeping anyway,” he added playfully, earning him a smart smack from two of Zenko’s three tails.

Jin smiled and cooed. “She’s pretty,” he said.

And yes, Li could feel Zenko’s foxy ego balloon like a bloated fish. One of the fox spirit’s tails whacked him in the head, again. Definitely not an accident.

“Excuse me,” a man dressed in a server’s apron said, stepping up to Li’s table, “but I’m afraid I have to ask you to take your pet outside. We don’t allow animals in here.”

Zenko made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a gargling hiss and Li groaned, dropping his face into his hands. “She’s not…” What was the point? “Fine,” he muttered, lifting his head. “Can I have a cup of cinnamon tea before I go then?”

“Not until that animal is outside,” the server declared with enough self-righteousness dripping from his voice to drown a cat-owl.

Fine then. “If I stand outside and order a cup of cinnamon tea, would that be okay?” Li tried again.

“How do I know you won’t steal the cup?” the server said, crossing his arms and glaring at Li imperiously.

This was turning out to be a very trying day. And his headache was back. Fabulous. Just what he needed. Pressing a hand to his pulsing temple, Li sighed and stood.

“Nevermind. I’ll be on my way,” he said, not waiting for a response.
“W-wait!” Jin called after him. "Li wait! Pao, where's Mushi?"

"He is on break, buying cabbages of all things," the man, Pao, said. Clearly he wasn't pleased with that this Mushi person was gone. "Why he saw the need to buy cabbages while on break is beyond me."

"But that's not- Li, no, wait-"

He really didn't want to wait. His head hurt enough to make him dizzy on his feet and Jin's raised voice wasn't helping him any. He walked out the door and turned left down the street towards the pottery block of the artisan’s district. Hopefully he would find something for Hope and Zenko on the way back to Ying and Than’s apartment. But if his headache didn’t ease up soon, he was just going to take a nap. A long nap. On the roof where no one would disturb him. He really didn’t want to deal with more people right now.

Jet wasn’t looking for Li, but maybe that was why he found him. Li seemed to have a rather odd ability to just appear out of thin air. Seriously, the guy moved too quietly to be normal. If Li was just a little bit older, wore more green and a nicer hat, and had longer hair, Jet wouldn’t have been surprised if the guy was Dai Li.

Habitually, he glanced at the rooftops, twirling the straw around in his mouth as he did so. He still wasn’t sure what to think of the Dai Li. He would be the first to admit they could sneak like nobody’s business, which was damn impressive. He’d seen them work a couple times in the rougher parts of the city when the Guard didn’t show up fast enough. But he didn’t trust them as far as he could throw them. They weren’t easy to read, unlike Li.

Even now, Jet could read Li as easily as a wanted poster. His lips were turned down, his forehead was crinkled from his frown, and the corners of his eyes were creased in annoyance. Even his hands were obviously gripping his wrists in those narrow sleeves tighter than usual. Li looked like he was going burst apart from frustrated energy.

Zenko, that very much not-just-a-fox, was curled up in Li’s arms so her three tails dangled freely over Li’s right arm, swaying with each step. Her head was tilted up so her chin pressed against Li’s left upper arm puffing out the red and white fur on the underside of her throat and chest. Her eyes were closed as usual but she wasn’t asleep. Her toothy mouth stayed closed but soft, high-pitched trills emanated from her tiny body. It looked like she was trying to comfort Li.

Definitely not just a fox.

One of those salt-and-pepper ears twitched and the fox turned its head so sightless eyes stared right at Jet. He gulped, feeling the tiny hairs on his arms stand on end. How did she know he was even here let alone exactly where he was?

Zenko barked at him and Li stopped, lifting his head and following the fox’s gaze. Jet pasted on his trademark grin and tossed Li a mock salute.

“Bad day?” he asked. Li’s shoulders drooped in a full on sulk and, quite frankly, it was amusing as hell. “I get it, man. We all have bad days. Where’re you off to?"

Li shrugged. “I guess I was looking for… food.”

Right. Sure you were. And Jet was a waterbender.
“Well, lucky you,” he said, looping an arm around Li’s back and deliberately ignoring the way the other boy tensed in surprise. “I’ve got just the thing.”

Wide pale gold eyes stared at Jet in suspicious disbelief. “What do yo-mff!”

It was incredibly difficult not to laugh at the utterly dumbstruck expression on Li’s face when Jet plunged his spare straw straight into the boy’s mouth. Li’s golden eyes were crossed, staring fixedly at the straw like it was going to bite him and a blotchy flush colored his cheeks. The not-fox in Li’s arms made a cackling sound which Jet did his best not to imagine was laughter and Li’s blush darkened.

Spitting out the straw -which was just rude, by the way- Li glared angrily at Jet. “What was that for?” Li demanded, over his not-fox’s cackling.

“You weren’t looking for food so-”

“Yes I was!”

“-and I wasn’t looking for you and you still can’t lie-”

“Yes I can!”

“-so I figured I’d be a nice person and share one of my hard-earned straws” -Li scoffed- “with you,” Jet finished with a wide grin. He held the grin just long enough to see the corners of Li’s lips twitch upwards. Jet would take that as a victory.

“And you just spit my gift out,” he added, just because he could. “You wound me, Li.”

Was that? Yes, it was. Jet smirked victoriously and knocked his shoulder against Li’s.

“That’s a smile,” he declared.

“No it’s not,” Li argued, obviously fighting back the smile and failing miserably.

“Yeah, it is.”

“No, it’s not.”

“And you’re a rotten liar.”

Li groaned and Jet laughed. He mussed the other boy’s short black hair with his fingers before tucking his hands into his pockets and whistling proudly. They walked together for a block or two before Li finally spoke.

“Thanks,” he said, holding that not-fox close to his chest. “I really needed that.”

“No problem,” Jet said. It really hadn’t been. It actually brightened Jet’s mood too. Today hadn’t been the best of days for him either. “Want to talk about it?” he offered, fully prepared for Li to say ‘no’.

So when Li sighed and began talking, he was both surprised and pleased. He could tell Li was skimming over some things, but he didn’t press. The fact Li was talking at all was impressive. Come to think of it, Jet couldn’t remember ever hearing Li talk this much at one time. When Li finally fell silent, if Jet could call frustrated muttering silent, he hummed.

“Feel better?” he asked. Li didn’t answer out loud but the softening of the creases on his forehead
spoke loud enough. “Want to vent some more? This time with, say, our blades?”

Li visibly perked up. His golden eyes shone hopefully, before dulling. “I left my dao at home,” he mumbled miserably.

Jet just shrugged. “We can go pick them up,” he said. “That’s not a big deal, you know.”

The other boy seemed to consider the offer, one finger scratching the not-fox’s head between the twitching ears. Eventually, Li sighed. “Then I’ll meet you at the warehouse this eveni-

Curious, Jet turned to Li and noticed the cold, hard gleam in the boy’s golden eyes. Warily, he followed Li’s gaze to a nearby roof. Something moved in the shadow cast from an adjacent building and Jet frowned. Dai Li.

Damn. Li saw a Dai Li before Jet even realized they were there. Shit, the kid was good.

“What here?” Jet muttered, nudging Li back into motion. Geez, didn’t the guy know better than to stare right at a Dai Li? That was basically asking one of them to come down and… talk to them. “Act natural,” he commanded.

Li deliberately looked away from the roof and started walking down the street as if nothing had happened. In fact, if Jet hadn’t seen Li react to the Dai Li’s presence, he would never have known anything was wrong. Li may not be capable of verbally lying, but he could act under pressure.

Li squawked and flinched when Zenko planted her teeth firmly on his finger.

This… Jet snorted. The glare he got for his trouble was vicious and had he seen that expression on a battlefield, it would have been intimidating. But coupled with that burning flush and frantic waving to free his bitten finger from Zenko’s unforgiving mouth was anything but intimidating.

Still, why were the Dai Li here? As far as Jet knew, nothing interesting had happened in this district except for the usual petty theft. But the Guard was perfectly capable of handling those incidents. The Dai Li rarely showed up for something as piddly that. Unless there was something Jet was missing.

A pathetic whine sounded from Li’s arms a moment before a streak of gray-black fur darted across the road to a noodle stand. The pitiful creature boldly hopped up onto a stool, startling the cook, and pawed at the edge of the wooden noodle stand. It turned its furry head to Li and barked.

“You like noodles?” Li asked, completely unfazed by the fact a fox was acting like a human child.

Zenko barked.

Li sighed. “I doubt I can afford it,” he said. “Besides, I’m not sure-

Zenko threw her head back and yowled mournfully.

“Zenko, come on-

She yowled again, drowning out Li’s words.

Golden eyes grew wide in indignation. “Are you… smarting me?” he gasped, looking for all the world like he’d been slapped.

The not-fox yowled again and Li smacked his face to hide his embarrassment.
“Alright, alright! Just stop.”

Zenko stopped, tilting her head expectantly at Li and swishing her tails excitedly.

Li glared at her. She grinned, white teeth sparkling. Li sighed and she made a chirping sound before seating herself primly on the stool like a model waiting to be painted.

“Fine,” Li grumbled, moving to sit on the stool next to the not-fox with a sigh of relief. He pulled out a strong of coins and dropped them on the wooden bar on the customer’s side of the stall. “How much for two bowls of noodles?” he asked.

The cook, a thin man with long black hair pulled back in a tidy ponytail and a trimmed beard, blinked in surprise. His earth brown eyes darted between Li and the fox next to him, furrowing his brow in confusion. He looked down at the two metal bowls he had been stirring the noodles in, then back at his unusual customers.

“Ah, two bowls?” he asked.

Oh what the hell.

“Three,” Jet sat, taking the last stool next to Li. He plopped a silver coin on the wooden stall. “I’ll cover half the price.”

Li sat up straighter and unstrung a single silver coin, placing it next to Jet’s and pocketing the rest murmuring a soft, “Thank you.”

Zenko flicked her ears and licked her chops hungrily. When Jet woke up this morning, he would never in a million years have guessed he would end up sitting at a noodle stand with Li and fox that absolutely was not a fox for an early supper. Life was weirder than fantasy, he thought with a wry smile. He liked it.

Li blinked and sat up suddenly, pressing a hand to his temple in mild surprise.

"What is it?" Jet asked.

"Nothing," Li said, sounding confused but relieved. "My headache's just gone."
Wan Shi Tong

Chapter Summary

In which Li dreams, passes a test, and promises to learn and share knowledge of something long lost to Fire.

Chapter Notes

A/N: And now we begin the main tale and some canon divergence, to an extent. Couple things first:

1) The mythos I'm working with for the Fire Nation is the legend of the Dragon and the Phoenix, which is a version of yin and yang. And since yin and yang play such an important role in the AtLA canon (the Moon and Ocean koi fish, parting yin and yang to create and bend lightning, etc) that I couldn't resist adding another element of that to this story.

2) Since the idea and duties of the Fire Sages was never fully developed in canon, it left much to open to be exploited. So that's exactly what I'm doing.

3) The 'hoshi no tama', or star-ball, is indeed a real thing in regards to kitsune. Remember that little glowing marble that Li found in the sand and returned to Zenko when they first met? It's important. In Japanese legend, all kitsune have one. It's what they store their powers, memories, everything in. Kitsune tend to keep their star-balls either in their mouths or on their tails. Zenko prefers to keep hers in her mouth for obvious reasons. The downside of star-balls is that the kitsune will die if parted from them for too long. It's adorable and has too many possibilities not to play with.

This was a dream. It had to be. It was the only explanation that made sense. Because, as far as Li knew, he had never been somewhere like this before. Pity that. It was enormous and full of scrolls and books. There were more scrolls here than he had ever seen in one place before and more books than were at the university library in Ba Sing Se.

He knew that.

“I am not particularly fond of Humans.”

Who-?! ...oh. How could he have possibly missed it? The Spirit was huge and Li felt every hair on his entire body stand on end. This wasn’t just any Spirit. He could feel it in his chi. The spiritual energy danced over his skin, pressed against his mind, and was just… there.

No. This was, not a Great Spirit like Agni, but one of the Major Spirits.

The creature towered above Li, making him feel small in more ways than one. It looked like a cat-owl, but without the distinctive furry tail. Instead, the Spirit was covered in ebony feathers that
shone in the ambient light filling the airy atrium he stood in. White feathers, smooth as undisturbed
snow on a mountainside, covered the Spirit’s birdlike face. Its two eyes gleamed like obsidian
above a small, hooked beak of a bird of prey.

This had to be a dream.

“Nor am I particularly fond of my servants disappearing without informing me of their absence,”
the Spirit said, advancing on two, wicked looking talons so it stood a mere meter from Li’s
trembling form.

:\textit{Forgive my absence.}:

“Zenko!” he gasped, staring down at the gray-black fox at his feet.

Crystal clear blue eyes lifted to his own, freezing him in place with their endless flood of emotion.
Calm. He needed to be calm. He had done no wrong. Calm. Wait. Listen. Learn. Speak only truth.

“Zenko,” the great Spirit murmured, its deep, educated voice echoing in the vast chamber of
knowledge. Knowledge. “You gave him such knowledge freely.”

“Wan Shi Tong,” Li whispered, drawing the Spirit’s attention. He straightened his shoulders and
stood tall. “You’re Wan Shi Tong.”

“I am,” the Spirit replied.

Li pressed a fist to an open palm and bowed deeply in respect and waited, unsure of how to
proceed. He had never met a Spirit of this caliber before. Or, at least, he couldn’t remember ever
meeting one.

The birdlike Spirit hummed thoughtfully. “You are Fire,” it said, clicking its beak in distaste. “You
are not the first of Fire to visit my Library. Another came some years past seeking knowledge.” A
hiss of feathers. “He burned an entire wing of my Library.”

Li winced. Fire destroyed.

Fire is also life.

“I cannot and do not speak for this other person,” Li said, straightening and tucking his hands into
his sleeves to indicate he was no threat. “But I do not wish harm to knowledge. I wish to learn.”

Wan Shi Tong made a sound that could be a harumph of disbelief. “So did the Bridge and his
companions,” he said, ruffling his wings. “They lied and stole from me.”

Bridge? Bridges spoke?

Not important.

“I am not the Bridge, Lord Wan Shi Tong,” Li said, tilting his head back to meet the Spirit’s black,
inhuman eyes. Goose-pig flesh covered his arms, and he fought down a shudder. “My name is-”

Speak truth.

“I… My name is unknown, even to me,” he admitted reluctantly, wishing badly that he could
disappear into the cool stone floor. “But I am called ‘Li,’ written with the symbol for ‘stand’ or
‘establish.’”
Wan Shi Tong’s black eyes flashed and it lowered its head down to Li’s level. That… was a really long neck. Li gulped.

“Unknown,” the Spirit rumbled, its head twisting unnaturally as it gazed steadily at Li. “Why is it unknown?”

Li took a deep breath and forced himself to hold Wan Shi Tong’s gaze as he spoke. “It was lost to me,” he said. “Two weeks ago, I woke up with no memory of who I am or where I’m from. I wish to learn these things, to find my true name, and learn of who I was.”

The sharp beak clicked as the Spirit hummed. “So you say,” he said softly. “And for what purpose have you kept one of my Knowledge Seekers by your side?”

“She stays because she wishes to,” Li answered firmly. “I do not force her to stay. She is free to come and go as she pleases.”

“Is that so?”

:He speaks true,: Zenko’s voice said in his head. :I stay because I gave him my word.:”

“Your word,” the Spirit murmured.

That did not seem to sit well with Wan Shi Tong. The Spirit in the form of a great bird of prey straightened to his full, intimidating height. Its eyes narrowed.

“Humans lie,” he said.

:He held my life in his hand,: Zenko said, her three tails twitching just enough to brush Li’s pants leg. :but returned it to me without question,: She lifted her pure, cerulean gaze to Li’s confused gold and Li’s nerves eased to something soft and gentle and warm. :He came to my aid when I was injured and alone. He saved my life without expecting anything in return. He found my lost hoshi no tama-:

What?

:-and returned it to me without attempting to trade or get anything in exchange,: Zenko continued.

Hoshi no tama.

Star-ball? He’d held Zenko’s star-ball? The heart of her soul, power, memories, and self? He’d held it, and returned it to her. He’d never known!

Would it have mattered if he had known?

No. He still would have returned it. He knew what it was to lose his memories, any figurative or literal power that he once held, and his self as he once was. He’d lost it all. He would never wish such a loss on another. At least he could not lose his soul. For a kitsune… For Zenko to be so vulnerable… To lose her in such a horrible way...

He shuddered at the thought.

:I gave him my word of my own volition,: The fox spirit’s gray-black face tilted so her black ears perked and her mouth opened, revealing sharp, white teeth in a foxy smile. :And I have never once regretted my decision.:”

Her tails wagged happily as her glowing eyes, the shade of a clear autumn sky, held Li’s pale gold
and passed her confidence, pride, and loyalty to him through their connection. It brought a smile to Li’s face and a warmth to his chest. She promised to be his as he was hers. Spirits did not break their word. They could not.

But Humans could. That thought froze the warmth in Li’s heart. Zenko had bound herself to someone who could not be bound in the same way. What if he betrayed her trust? What if she wished to be free? What if he never remembered who he was and she was forced to remain with him until his death? That would be cruel.

Black ears as soft as silk folded back in dismay as Zenko whined and pawed at Li’s pants leg. Never. She would never doubt him. She knew him. She trusted him. She would stay until her promise was fulfilled. Longer if she so desired. She grinned and swished her tails proudly, her eyes sparkling coyly.

:Besides,: she said for Li and Wan Shi Tong to hear, :I earned another tail when he accepted my promise.: Wan Shi Tong’s obsidian eyes sparkled with interest. “Did you?” he said. “Most interesting.”

The Spirit regarded Li with careful fascination. “A Human of Fire who has lost his name and memories yet gained the trust and companionship of one of my own Knowledge Seekers. That is not something that has happened in living memory.”

Wan Shi Tong extended his neck until his feathered face was mere inches from Li’s. Intelligent eyes studied Li’s face with the same attention a master swordsman paid to his sword.

“You would be a unique addition to my collection,” the Spirit said thoughtfully.

Li gulped. He felt the familiar warmth and pressure of Zenko sitting on his foot and forced himself to calm down. This was probably just a test.

Probably.

Hopefully.

“You have my approval,” Wan Shi Tong declared, retracting his neck so he no longer occupied Li’s personal space. “You have my Knowledge Seeker’s word to stay with you, but I would have your word to see her returned alive and sound of mind and body,” he said.

“You have it,” Li said, bowing with his fist pressed to his open palm. “You already had it. I never want to see her injured or lost.”

The Spirit hummed, shifting one of his massive wings comfortably. “Know this, Human called Li, should you ever break your word, I will know. You will not survive that mistake.”

Understandable, Li thought, nodding. He probably wouldn’t want to survive such a mistake either.

Zenko made a warbling call that he recognized as a plea and obediently knelt so she could leap onto his shoulders. She licked his scar just below his eye and he smiled, scratching his fingers behind her ears, much to her vocal pleasure.

Wan Shi Tong clicked his beak and tsked. “You seek knowledge,” he said. “You seek your name. Tell me, Human called Li, if I told you your name was known to me, would you demand it of me?”

Li froze, hope flooding through his veins as he lifted his guileless gaze to Wan Shi Tong’s ancient,
knowing eyes. Did Wan Shi Tong know? Did he…? Li wanted to know. He wanted so badly… But to know so easily, would it have meaning? He would have his name, but at what cost? Knowledge was never free. And even if it was, would knowing his name without context have any purpose? Would knowing ease the hole in his mind and his heart where his memories once were?

No, he realized with dawning sadness. No, it would not. He would have a name for his past, but no past to go with the name. It would be like knowing the paper he held was a map, but being too blind to read and understand it. It would be useless; merely a tease of what had been and perhaps could be again. But it would not be now.

So, with a heavy heart, he shook his head. “No,” he whispered, his voice carrying in the silent atrium. “No, I would not.” He lifted his head to meet Wan Shi Tong’s gaze. “I want to learn it from my own experiences, my own power. A name without a past is just a book without text. Useless.”

The Spirit in the form of a bird made a sound of approval. “You are wise for your age,” he said. “Very well. Then to you and only you, do I offer this knowledge. The world is out of balance. Spirits who have never known malevolence are becoming tangled in the net of the Human world and losing themselves. Sometimes of their own doing,” unnatural eyes hardened, “sometimes not. The way of the Sage may be lost, corrupted by time and Human folly. But there are a few who still practice versions of this path.”

On his shoulder, Zenko stilled staring up at Wan Shi Tong with wide eyes. She knew what Wan Shi Tong was alluding to. Pity Li didn’t.

“In exchange for keeping one of my own house in your protection,” the Spirit said, “I want you to give me knowledge.”

Li frowned. “What kind of knowledge?”

“You know that you are Fire,” Wan Shi Tong said. “Then I want your knowledge of the path of the Fire Sage.”

Li blinked, unsure of what to say. “I-I’m not a Fire Sage,” he said.

“No,” the ancient Spirit agreed. “But I have no doubt you know some of what they do.”

There was a hint there, Li knew it. He just didn’t know enough to understand it.

Wan Shi Tong leaned down so his eyes were once again close to Li’s, reflecting gold eyes, black hair, and a scarred face. “I want to know what you know, what you see, what you do, what you learn,” the ancient, ageless Spirit continued. “You have enough knowledge already to start down this path, whether you remember it now or not. I will lend you the knowledge you need, when you need it, but I want to learn.”

Ah. He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things. A Knowledge Spirit. The Knowledge Spirit. Nothing would be more precious to a Knowledge Spirit than learning something new, something never done or seen before, something unique to a single person.

“You want my memories,” Li said, beginning to understand.

“The memories you lost are of little interest to me at the moment,” Wan Shi Tong said dismissively. “The memories you will gain, however, they are of great interest.”

“How would I give you memories?” Li asked, frowning in consternation.
The Spirit clicked its beak. “It is said, when Humans first came to this world—”

What? What does that mean?

“-Agni took the form of a dragon,” Wan Shi Tong continued over Li’s thoughts. “He saw a great many people, but only one clan drew his interest. They were weak, dying, and all but destroyed. But they refused to die. They refused to give up. They fought. They lived. They survived. They burned.” Obsidian eyes flashed sending chills up Li’s spine. “So Agni protected these people. They became the phoenix to Agni’s dragon, always returning from the ashes no matter how or what they suffered. They could never be completely destroyed. They burned, they lived, they returned. Always. Because they were Fire.”

This… Li couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t look away. He could feel Zenko shift on his shoulder, feel the prickle on his skin from her blue gaze, but he couldn’t look at her. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t look away from the endless darkness that was Wan Shi Tong. This was the darkness that knew, that understood, that remembered. That would always remember. He couldn’t look away. He wasn’t sure he wanted to.

He was drowning in obsidian that burned like the heart of the volcano that birthed it and the ageless voice of Wan Shi Tong.

“Ancient and endless is this dance of Fire,” The Knowledge Spirit said. “Life, loss, pain, suffering, destruction, burning, rebounding, and returning. Never surrendering. Never dying. So when Agni’s Phoenix turned on him and his own, he refused to abandon them entirely. Firebending has changed, the dance lost, the phoenix’s wings clipped. One lives who knows the Dance of the Dragon, but none live who know the Dance of the Phoenix. For it was lost with the path of the Sage. Follow the path of the Sage, return the Dance of the Phoenix, and balance Fire as it should be: the child and mate of Agni himself. And share that knowledge with me.”

“How?” Li whispered, overwhelmed by this request.

“That is for you to decide, Human called Li.”

He woke in a cold sweat despite the heat and humidity of the night air on the rooftop. But he took comfort in the soft fur against his scarred cheek and the two blue eyes that gazed at him in trust and adoration. He didn’t know what to do.

But as long as he wasn’t alone, he wasn’t terrified anymore.
Confess

Chapter Summary

In which Li confesses something that could potentially destroy everything to the two people who mean the most to him, and hopes for the best.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I promised Than and Ying would be back. They deserve to know a few things, after all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Li sighed, glaring at the mush of clay that had once been in the process of becoming a cup. He just didn’t have the skills for this. Most apprentices started very young. So being surrounded by so many potters who were obviously better than he was nipped at his self-confidence.

Besides, Wan Shi Tong’s demand from last night’s dream was prying into his every waking thought. How, by Agni’s flaming face, was he supposed to find a firebending style long lost to Human memory and become a Fire Sage? He couldn’t firebend. He couldn’t bend at all. And any knowledge he might have had of firebending and Fire Sages was lost, locked away with his past and his true name.

But that wasn’t the whole truth, was it?

Li dropped his gaze to his hands. Callouses from years of wielding his dao caught and held chunks of drying clay to his skin. This was not what he was meant to do. His body itched to move. He just couldn’t remember how to move.

Wan Shi Tong wanted him to find a firebending style that was lost. He could only do that if he was a firebender. But he couldn’t remember ever bending. He didn’t even know what it felt like to touch a flame, or hold a flame in his hand, or breathe fire to stop the ice from freezing him solid, or channel heat into his hands to melt the unforgiving ice above his head, holding him under the water, threatening to drown him if he couldn’t melt his way through to… the surface.

He squeezed his eyes shut and shuddered. He did know what that felt like. He remembered what that felt like. He just couldn’t remember anything else. Not that he wanted to remember ice. Water was not friendly.

So, Fire. He could remember bending fire. But how? When? Where? Those questions, he didn’t know the answer to. Pity. He could really use some answers right about now. Or a hint. Or a starting point. Or something.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, sounding about as frustrated as Li felt. The potters were doing their best to finish what projects they had before the storms came later that day. But Li couldn’t wait for the rain, the thunder, the lightning. He needed it to drown out his worries and fears and
doubts.

Frustrated, he stood from his small potter’s wheel and wiped his hands on a cloth by his side. He needed to move.

“Li.”

Damn.

He turned and saw Than drying his hands before walking over to join him. Immediately, Li felt guilty. He still hadn’t told either Than or Ying about his discovery of his heritage, even though he suspected they already knew.

Than stopped next to Li and offered a ready smile. “Taking a break? Mind if I join you?” he asked, his smile widening when Li nodded. “I noticed you slept on the roof last night. I hope it wasn’t too cold up there.” He laughed. “Hope was a bit upset you weren’t there to hold her though. She really does like you.”

A flush of pleasure flooded Li’s cheeks as they strode out into the courtyard together where the youngest children played. The kilns stood hot and silent in the mid-morning humidity. Than guided Li to the low wall surrounding the kilns and sat down, patting the stone next to him inviting Li to join him.

Than clasped his hands in his lap. “Something’s bothering you,” he said. It wasn’t a question, but Li still bowed his head in acknowledgement. Than sighed. “Is it something you want to talk about?”

A sharp bark drew Li’s attention to the gray-black fox spirit darting playfully between the children, a bright red ball in her mouth. A small smile wormed its way onto his face. He glanced at Than and his smile faded.

“You… Did…” He swallowed heavily and licked his lips, avoiding Than’s gaze. He needed to know, but he was afraid of what would happen if… they knew. “Did you know that I’m Fire?” he asked forcing out the words before he could second guess himself. He kept his voice low so no one would overhear their conversation.

Sadness tinged Than’s eyes, but he smiled and nodded. “We did,” he said, and Li wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved or hurt by the confession. “Is it something you want to talk about?”

A sharp bark drew Li’s attention to the gray-black fox spirit darting playfully between the children, a bright red ball in her mouth. A small smile wormed its way onto his face. He glanced at Than and his smile faded.

“You… Did…” He swallowed heavily and licked his lips, avoiding Than’s gaze. He needed to know, but he was afraid of what would happen if… they knew. “Did you know that I’m Fire?” he asked forcing out the words before he could second guess himself. He kept his voice low so no one would overhear their conversation.

Sadness tinged Than’s eyes, but he smiled and nodded. “We did,” he said, and Li wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved or hurt by the confession. “We both did.”

“Did you always know?” Li pressed hesitantly.

Than grimaced but nodded again. “We did, yes,” he admitted. “At first, we thought you knew. But we decided that, even if you didn’t know, we wanted you to stay.” One of Than’s clay encrusted hands covered Li’s shaking fingers, squeezing them comforting. “When we found you, you were tired, wounded, half starved, and alone. We could never turn away someone like that. And you have never given us any reason to regret that decision.”

Li smiled softly, ducking his head and gazing at Than’s hand over his own. Now for the harder part.

“I remember firebending,” he said, barely above a whisper. “I don’t remember how. But I remember doing it.”

Silence.
It took everything Li had not to shrink into himself or get up and run for his life. He told himself Than would never hurt him or turn him over to the Guard, or worse the Dai Li. But there was always the chance-

“I see.”

Two words. Soft. Final.

Disappointed.

Why? Why did that one word break Li’s heart? It was as if something inside him crumbled. His chest ached, his head pounded, and his breathe struggled to fill his lung. Disappointment. It was crushing him. He never even noticed when the tears began to fall.

He was only aware of the sudden warmth of Than’s arms around his body, holding him close. A hand pressed against his scarred cheek, pressing Li’s face into Than’s chest, and hiding his tears from view. Li was shaking. He could feel himself shaking in Than’s arms. He couldn’t stop. He couldn’t think. He could barely breathe.

But he could feel the hot tears trailing down his cheeks. He could hear the blood roaring in his veins, making his head pound and nearly drowning out Than’s soothing words.

Soothing? Why soothing? Why couldn’t he breathe? Why did he feel so hot?

Fire.

“Easy,” he heard Than murmur by his scarred ear.

His eyesight through that eye may not be the best, but his hearing in that ear was sharp. He heard every word Than whispered to him, felt every breath the man took, and tried to match his own breathing with Than’s.

“I’m not mad,” Than murmured. “I couldn’t be mad. You’ve done me no wrong. You haven’t done anything wrong. I’m not mad.”

“Why?” It came out more as a sob than a question. “Why?”

The arms around him tightened their hold, pressing him closer, and fingers carded through his short hair.

“Because you helped Ying when she needed it,” Than said. “Because you stayed with us when we reached Ba Sing Se. Because Hope sees your face and laughs. Because you try and try and try despite the numerous ways the clay fails you.” There was a smile in Than’s voice now and Li snorted, earning him a soft chuckle. “Because you’ve had numerous chances to hurt us, and you never took them. You went out of your way to be sure we were comfortable, despite only knowing us for two weeks. Because I’ve seen your heart, Li,” he said, pressing his lips to short black hair, “and I know you care.”

Then why-?

“I admit, I’m surprised,” Than continued, resting his chin on Li’s head. “I probably shouldn’t be. It seems our lives have become spirit tales. I am surprised you’re a firebender. But I’m not mad. You are Fire. It was obvious from the moment I heard you call to Agni and saw the fire in your eyes.”

Li flushed in embarrassment and turned his head so his shut eyes pressed into Than’s shirt.
“I’m proud of you.”

What?

Surprised and anxious, Li sat up just enough to meet Than’s deep brown eyes. “Proud?” He couldn’t remember ever making anyone proud before. All he knew was disappointment.

But Than’s eyes were gentle and his smile thoughtful. “Yes,” he said. “I proud of you. You could have kept this secret from us. I wouldn’t have blamed you if you did. Being a firebender in the heart of the Earth Kingdom…” He shook his head with concern. “I can only imagine how terrifying that could be. But you came to me, you trusted me.” Than placed a heavy hand on Li’s shoulder. “I am honored to know you’ve given me that. I will never betray that trust.” He brushed the rough pads of his fingers against Li’s neck and smiled. “I would like to tell Ying. However,” he added before Li could speak, “I will not tell Ying if you don’t want me to. Although I bet she’ll figure it out.” He leaned close and said in a conspiratorial voice, “Mothers always find out.”

Than winked and Li felt lighter. The fear and anxiety was still there, boiling under his skin like… like Fire. He consciously slowed his breathing, measuring it. In, hold, out. In, hold, out. Should he tell Ying? Than trusted him. He wanted… In, hold, out.

“I want to tell Ying,” he said.

Than’s smile widened and he squeezed Li’s neck in a comforting manner. “Wait here,” he said.

He waited for Li to nod before standing and walking across the courtyard to where Ying sat nursing little Hope. Li watched her look up and smile when Than approached, closing her eyes and smiling when her husband placed a kiss on her brow. Li watched her smile morph into worry as she listened to Than speak, and tried not to twitch when she stood and walked over to Li.

Please. Dear Agni, please don’t let her hate him.

“Li?” she said, adjusting Hope so the baby rested comfortably in her arms.

“What should he say? How should he say it? Than accepted him without question. There was little doubt Ying wouldn’t do the same. Li knew that, but just the possibility of her rejecting him, fearing him, hating him…

“Oh Li,” Ying murmured, taking a seat next to him and smiling tenderly. “I’m sure whatever you need to tell me can be so horrible that you woul-”

“I’m a firebender.”

Ying froze, gentle brown eyes wide in surprise. Oh Agni. Li was so stupid. You don’t just announce something like that without context or an explanation or something!

“I didn’t know until last night,” he said quickly, tripping over his words in his haste to make her understand, to prevent her from reacting… badly. “I don’t remember how to firebend, but I know I can.” He dropped his gaze to stare at his hands as he tried to explain. “Last night, I… Oh this was going to sound ridiculous. “Last night, I saw Wan Shi Tong in my dreams. Zenko was there. Zenko is one of Wan Shi Tong’s Knowledge Seekers and he was looking for her. He made me promise to protect her and bring her back to him. But he also wants me to find a firebending style that no one knows about and something about the path of a Sage and I have no idea what I’m doing or how to do it or where to even look to start doing anything I….”

He bit his lip, feeling tears prickle his good eye despite his shaking.
“Please don’t hate me,” he whispered.

Ying hummed, nudging him with her shoulder. “I could never hate you, I don’t think,” she said. “And, Li, I already suspected you were a firebender.”

Li sat up straight and stared at Ying in disbelief. “Wha- You- How?! I didn’t know until-”

She pressed a single finger against Li’s lips and laughed. “It wasn’t any one thing,” she said thoughtfully. “It was a lot of things. How you move when you’re frightened or angry, how you breathe, how you look into a campfire or candle like it calms you, and,” she shot Li a sly grin, “when Cheng came to me demanding to know how you knew the heat in the kiln wasn’t where it should be and broke those jars.”

Oh. Li flushed. Why didn’t he think of that?

“I was…” Oh. “I was firebending,” he breathed, the realization knocking the wind out of him. No. Breathe. Fire is life. Fire is… in the breath. In, hold, out.

In, hold, out.

Oh.

Li could barely believe it. “I was firebending without realizing it.”

Ying hummed. “I told Cheng you were Than’s sister’s son,” she said. “It’s not a complete lie. Bao did love someone from the Fire Nation. But then, she always did have an… eclectic preference in partners. I never knew women fought in the Fire Nation army until then. When her partner passed, Bao followed soon after. That’s when Than and I decided to leave for Ba Sing Se.”

She paused to work her collar free of Hope’s grasping fingers. “Cheng didn’t question my explanation,” she said. “And I doubt Bao would mind if we added you to the family this way. Besides,” she added with a twinkle in her eye, “once you start bending, we may not have to buy as much firewood and meals can be cooked much faster.”

Li snorted despite himself. This was too good to be true. After everything Ying and Than had suffered… After everything the entire Earth Kingdom had suffered… Why were so accepting of him? It felt so… odd.

“So you’re… not mad?” he mumbled, unsure. Ying gave him a look that made him feel like a child who had just asked to stay up past their bedtime. He flushed.

Ying scoffed. “No, I’m not mad,” she said. “Confused, and worried. I don’t want you to get hurt. You may not be my son by blood, but blood isn’t the be all, end all of family.”

In her arms, Hope squealed and reached out to Li, her face scrunching into loud cries when she couldn’t reach him. Ying promptly handed her over to Li who instinctively took the child, a dumbstruck expression on his face. Ying chuckled and stood, stretching her arms and arching her back.

“I’m not sure how to help you with He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things,” she said, turning back to a still stunned Li and a very happy and content Hope. “But I wouldn’t tell anyone else about your firebending. Than and I can protect you and Cheng is willing to tolerate your presence because he believes you have Earth in your blood. He’s also curious about what else you can do for the kilns.”
Well, if he could be useful aside from failing to make pottery…

“That aside,” Ying added, her expression darkening as she flashed a swift but careful glance at the rooftops, “as anyone will tell you, there’s no way someone from the Fire Nation could sneak into the Impenetrable City. Why would they?” Her eyes narrowed. “There is no war in Ba Sing Se.”

Oh. That could be useful. Maybe.

Something twinged on the edges of his senses, like a tugging or… heat. Huh. Unconscious firebending.

“In that case, you might want to tell Cheng that there’s,” he paused, tilting his head to be sure he was reading the feeling right, “a couple problems with the kiln behind me.”

Ying pursed her lips and propped her hands on her hips. “I bet I know whose batch that is, too,” she muttered, shaking her head. “I’ll go tell Cheng. In the meantime, is there anything else you need?”

He needed to move still. But the sun felt good so, maybe sitting outside was alright. Oh, right. Firebending. No wonder the sun felt so good to him. If he hadn’t been able to pull himself out into Agni’s light after he first woke up with that wound, would he have survived?

Now there was a dark thought.

Should he mention that to Wan Shi Tong? How was he going to share his memories with Wan Shi Tong in the first place, anyway? Talking probably wouldn’t be enough. With that huge library… He could write. He knew he could.

“Something to write with?” he asked.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: If anyone's unsure about how easily Than and Ying handle this, remember that they're now very aware that they're caught up in spirit tales. The Avatar has returned to the world, there is a literal fox spirit following around the amnesiac Fire Nation boy they picked up in the desert, and that Fire Nation boy is undeniably attached to them. Besides, Than was observant. He noticed the obvious indicators that Li was Fire Nation from the beginning and both he and Ying chose to keep Li anyway. What were the odds this random Fire Nation boy was a firebender? Rather high, actually, all things considered. So it makes sense to me.

They may not fully understand the situation and all its inherent insanity (they don't), and they know things won't go smoothly after this (it won't), but they love and care for Li who obviously loves and cares for them. And Li has never even tried to do anything they would deem wrong (aside from Li and Zenko's passport thieving escapade). That's why they chose to accept him anyway. It won't be easy, but love is never easy.

Besides, they're curious. And everyone knows better than to cross a spirit like Wan Shi Tong without some serious reasons. Which is why I will never understand what possessed the GAang to do what they did.
If anyone has any other questions or suggestions, let me know. ^_^
Doodles

Chapter Summary

In which Li doodles, tries to explain, and Jet comes to the rescue. Ish.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for the short chapter. I have a splitting headache but I wanted to get this out.

Where was he supposed to start? How was he supposed to start?

He had spent most of the day writing, trying to put words to his overstressed mind. His wrist ached, but he felt like he still hadn’t done enough. Wan Shi Tong was *The Knowledge Spirit*. Li had little doubt Wan Shi Tong would accept anything short of Li’s best. Li wouldn’t blame him honestly. The Knowledge Spirit had a reputation to uphold as He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things, after all.

And he was rambling. His thoughts were racing too fast for him to catch up. So I stopped journaling and began doodling on a few blank sheets of paper separate from the scroll. He wasn’t sure what he was drawing, nor did he care much, but it was smooth and easy on his wrists and memories. It was almost therapeutic.

“What’s that symbol mean?”

Blinking back to the present, Li paused his doodling and lifted his head. A couple of the children still too young to apprentice under the potters or elsewhere were kneeling across from him. A green eyed girl named Jiao and a brown eyed boy named Gan were known to be curious and mischievous troublemakers. Zenko loved them best of the children.

Since when did they get here? He didn’t even notice them arrive, let alone kneel on the grass across from his makeshift table.

Careless! He was slipping.

What? Where did that thought come from?

Li felt warmth that wasn’t from the fading sunlight bloom in his cheeks as he looked back down at his numerous thoughtless doodles. He ran a hand through his short hair and grimaced. What was he supposed to say? It wasn’t like he knew what he was drawing.

Or did he?

The symbol Jiao was pointing to was a relatively simple kanji. It was just a small box on the left and a larger box on the left with two lines hanging down from it, the right one longer than the
other. It was a rather odd symbol to just draw randomly. It wasn’t used often. At least, Li was fairly certain it wasn’t used often.

That aside, since when did his doodles become whole words? Actually, he realized, studying the rest of the kanji he’d drawn below that first symbol, since when did his doodles become whole phrases? They looked like… prayers? Or were they…

Oh. By Agni, they were.

“Li. Li!”

“Uh- What?” he gasped, straightening and blushing deeply. Jiao and Gan were staring at him expectantly. “Right, sorry! Um, it means ‘spell.’”

“Spell?” Gan repeated, frowning in confusion. “What’s a spell?”

What’s a spell? How did they not know? ...How did he know? Eh…

“Well,” Li said hesitantly, trying to put words to the concept, “it’s a… thing that is… um, binds something, I guess.”

Well done, Li. Nice choice of words. Very informative. Someone put him out of his misery now and be done with it.

Fur tickled his hand and he dropped his gaze to where Zenko was nosing her way through the loop of his arm and side. He loosened the tension in his arm so she could slip through and rest her front paws on his thigh. Her nose brushed the papers, sniffing the still drying paint from his doodles. Her ears were flipped forward in open interest.

“How does a word bind something?” Jiao asked. “It’s just a word.”

“Words have power,” Li answered without thinking. “You have a name, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Jiao said, smiling so the two empty gaps from her recently lost teeth were plainly visible. “You do too.”

Ah. About that.

“Yes,” Li replied slowly, forcing a faint smile to stay on his face. “I do.” Pity he didn’t remember it. “Well, a name is a type of spell.”

And now they were staring at him like he was crazy. Zenko pulled the rest of her slender, furry body through his arm and sat on his lap. Well, she didn’t think he was crazy -she smacked him with her tails- and she was listening to him. She probably understood this better than he did anyway. She was a Spirit, after all.

“Jiao, you are Jiao,” Li said, meeting the little girl’s bright green eyes. “That’s your name. It’s who you are. It binds you. When your mother calls your name, you answer, don’t you?”

She blushed and shrugged her shoulders. “Yeah,” she said shyly.

They both knew that wasn’t always the truth. Li’s smile grew.

“And Gan,” Li continued, “your name is Gan. It’s you. It’s who you are. It binds you.”

“Does ‘Li’ bind you?” Gan asked, leaning over the makeshift table excitedly. “Can I use your name
spell to make you do stuff?"

Uh. Li flushed awkwardly. “N-no,” he admitted. “Not exactly. But also, yes.”

“Oh?”

Oh Agni, save him.

Zenko made a warbling sound and shook herself. Koh’s balls, why not.

“Did your parents ever tell you spirit tales?” Li asked, trying another method.

“Oh! Yeah!” Jiao said, perking up happily. “I love the one about the badgermole and the dillolion.”

Li didn’t know that one. “Right, well, did any of those stories say what happens when you give a name to a Spirit?” he said.

Both Jiao and Gan shrank in discomfort, but it was Gan who eventually spoke up. “Momma said not to do that. It can make the Spirit more dangerous.”

“She’s right,” Li said, nodding. “Naming a Spirit gives it power, allows it to manifest and be. But if the Spirit gives you a name to call it,” he began petting the gay-black fur on Zenko’s head and the red-orange tufts by her cheeks to her vocal pleasure, “then it’s usually fine.”

“Why’s that?” Jiao asked, reaching out to pet Zenko’s snout.

“Because it’s not their true name,” Li said. “It’s just a name.” Like ‘Li’. Although, he was becoming alarmingly attached to ‘Li’. “Or,” he added, considering his words, “the Spirit may already have a true name that is known. But no one is powerful enough to use that name against them. Their name can’t become a weapon.”

“What?” Gan drawled, tilting his head in childish confusion that was almost comical. “Names can’t hurt you.”

“No?” Li countered. “If someone said ‘that boy over there is annoying,’ it may not bother you because there are lots of boys over there. But if that person said ‘Gan is annoying,’ then that would hurt your feelings, wouldn’t it?”

Gan nodded, sticking out his lower lip in a sulk.

“My brother isn’t annoying,” Jiao said, sounding upset.

“No, he isn’t,” Li said quickly, paling and waving his hands frantically to stave off childish anger. “It was just an example. I’m sorry.”

He looked to Zenko for support. She just sniffed at him, picked up his doodles in her toothy mouth, and pranced off, leaving him to the mercy of a righteously angry six-year-old sister.

Li was sulking. It was so obvious, Jet felt like laughing. Seriously, could the guy ever not wear his emotions on his face?

A distinctive bark yanked his attention from Li to the potter’s courtyard where that not-fox sat staring at him. Jet would still bet his swords that thing anything but ‘just a fox.’ Shifting his stance
under the not-fox’s eerie sightless stare, Jet rested his hands on his hips and wished he had the familiar weight of his swords here. He had left with Smellerbee and Longshot at their one room apartment to avoid another run-in with a local gang. It seemed carrying weapons into the wrong area meant a threat. Even if the weapons were sheathed.

“Jet?”

He turned his eyes to startling gold and smirked, very aware of that unnatural creature’s blind eyes on him. “Hey Li,” he said, trotting right up to where the other boy sat. “You look awful.”

Li shot him a flat glare and huffed, allowing himself to fallback to the grass in a sulk. “Whatever,” Jet barely heard Li grumble.

When Ying had let Jet in, she’d made him promise to get Li out of the compound for the day. Apparently, Li… well, Ying didn’t outright say Li was in trouble, but Jet wasn’t stupid. Most people didn’t get two full days off from work in a row unless something had happened or was happening. And judging from the state Jet found Li in right now, he wouldn’t be surprised if Li had fumbled and broken a jar or two.

Jet snorted and held out a hand to the prone form, when he noticed the dried writing on a bench near where Li lay. It was covered in calligraphy that would have made an Upper Ring noble jealous. There were also a few symbols on those loose papers that Jet didn’t recognize. One of those symbols actually looked like a one-eyed creature.

Doodles?

Then Li was grasping his hand and Jet focused on hauling his friend to his feet. He made sure to smack Li’s back when he was up just to see that flustered expression. Totally worth it. Even the glare Li shot him through the flush was adorable.

“Relax,” Jet said, nudging Li towards the door. “I’m here to rescue you. The least you could do is thank me.”

Golden eyes rolled, but there was the faintest hint of a smile on Li’s face. Victory.

“You know,” Jet drawled, pulling the straw from his mouth to wave in a show of nonchalance, “I heard something’s up in the inner Rings. It’s all super hush hush, but I bet it’s interesting. I thought you and I could pay the Middle Ring a little visit.”

Li shrugged. “Could we stop at the library there?” he asked. “I want to check something.”

“You got something on hold?” Jet said with a frown. “I didn’t think they did that for us Lower Ring refugees.”

“They don’t,” Li replied, pausing and turning.

Curious, Jet followed Li’s gaze and deliberately did not take a wary step back when that not-fox bounded over. It stopped by the bench to scoop the half-written scroll and scribbles in its mouth before leaping up onto Li’s shoulders. Jet stared at the creature suspiciously, which it seemed to notice. Sharp, white fangs glistened in the fading sunlight as the storm from the bay beyond the wall moved in. Already, the sky was darker than when he first arrived here.

More importantly… “Did you write those?” he asked, pointing to the elegant calligraphy in Li’s hands.
The shy flick of golden eyes was answer enough, but the verbal confirmation was nice. If surprising.

“You wrote that?” Jet said, staring at Li in surprise. “All of it?” Damn. That was impressive. “Where did you learn to write like that?”

All the color drained from Li’s face and a brief flicker of terror flashed in his pale gold eyes, vanishing a second later.

Hoo, boy. Was there a story there.

“It’s not important right now,” Li said.

He tucked the scroll in a bag by Ying who smiled up at them. Interestingly, the not-fox didn’t like it when Li moved to tuck the doodles in the bag too, snapping at Li’s fingers. Strange. Jet couldn’t remember seeing the creature do that to Li before. Li just sighed and tucked the doodles in his pockets instead and made his way to the door.

“It’s going to rain soon,” Li said, gazing up at the darkening sky.

“Yeah,” Jet said with a shrug. “But we can always find somewhere to hole up in until after the rain. Besides,” he winked, grinning at the predictably flustered look on Li’s face, “I have a thing for water.”

Li stared at him, completely missing the joke, before shaking his head and striding into the street with Jet on his heels.
Rain

Chapter Summary

In which it rains, Jet drools, Li worries, and Jet decides a particularly intriguing puzzle is worth the risk.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Meant to update this last night, but I had a splitting headache and ended up falling asleep while writing. So I didn't finish it and had to wait until after I got off work to finish this and upload it. Whoops. If it means anything, things are beginning to happen plot-wise.

Li wasn’t wrong. It did start raining almost as soon as they boarded the train. It was just a light sprinkle at the moment, but with the speed the train was moving, it didn’t feel like a sprinkle. The thick paper curtains were pulled down over the windows to keep the majority of the rainwater from dribbling into the cars. Most people were standing to avoid the few puddles beginning to form on the seats by the windows.

Most people. Li didn’t seem to care. He was sitting in one of the window seats with that not-fox in his lap, running his fingers through the critter’s fur. Judging from the contented warbling sounds, Zenko was enjoying the attention.

Jet preferred standing and leaning against the pole by Li’s seat. Li’s straw hat hung loosely from his neck, pressed between Li’s back and the stone of the train. Most of the rainwater that did spray in from the train window behind Li hit the hat and was deflected away. Jet snorted and shook his head in amusement.

Li was clearly uncomfortable surrounded by so many people. Most of the time, the trains weren’t very full at this time of day. But with the rain, there were more people riding the train than usual. It was a bit crowded, Jet would admit. But he liked it. It reminded him of his crowded arboreal home.

...There went the mood.

Shifting the straw from one side of his mouth to the other, Jet adjusted his stance. Much better. Now he could loop one arm around the pole and still lean against it comfortably despite the movement of the cars. They pulled into the station before crossing into the Middle Ring and he stood straighter so the new passengers could get in through the doors next to him.

Li really looked uncomfortable now. It was subtle, but Jet could see the signs. The narrowing at the corner of Li’s golden eyes, the way his hands spent longer running through Zenko’s fur, and the way he tensed, straightening in his seat and noticing every shift a person made towards him.

“Hey,” Jet said softly, startling the boy so golden eyes whipped up to stare at him. “You okay? Crowds not your thing?”
Li shook his head and hunched his shoulders, a faint blush coloring his cheeks through the pallor of discomfort. He shook his head, his black hair brushing his temples and his forehead. It was getting longer. Soon, it may be long enough to grab a substantial handful. That could be useful if Li ever gave in to Jet’s urgings and decided to do some hand-to-hand combat instead of sword fighting on one of their sparring nights. Or in bed.

“You want me to stand in front of you?” he offered, doing his best to hold an innocently concerned expression. “I could be a barrier.” And other things.

Li hesitated, clearly considering the offer, before eventually shaking his head no. “I’ll be fine,” he said. “We’re getting off at the next stop anyway.”

Jet shrugged and flicked the straw in his mouth absently. The not-fox in Li’s lap suddenly stood and shook herself, fluffing up her fur before curling back up in a ball of gray-black fluff. For a creepy critter that was obviously way too intelligent to be just a dumb animal, that fur looked really soft.

“Would it…” The not-fox lifted its head and Jet hesitated, hand half extended towards Zenko’s head. The creature’s closed eyes focused directly on him and that was not normal. “Can I pet her?” he asked, after swallowing his nerves.

“If she doesn’t mind,” Li answered, nodding to the three tailed not-fox in his lap.

Zenko cocked her head and bumped Jet’s extended hand with her wet nose. She really was cute. King of. In a creepy sort of way.

Hesitantly, Jet placed his hand on her head and began scratching. The not-fox’s mouth opened and let out a squeaky chirping sound that drew quite a bit of startled attention from the other, squished passengers. She didn’t seem to mind in the least. That expression on her face actually looked suspiciously like a grin.

The train pulled into the station closest to the Ba Sing Se university in the Middle Ring and both of them got up. They had to push and shove to make sure they actually made it out of the train before it left again. But it seemed like everyone wanted to get off here. What were the odds?

The rain was pattering on the stone roof of the station, drowning out the low murmur of disgruntled voices from damp Middle Ring citizens. Li didn’t seem to mind though, even going so far as the sigh in relief once they were on the station platform and out of the crowded train car.

He shifted the not-fox in his arms so he could free one hand to pull his straw hat up and secure it in place on his head. When he was finished, Zenko hopped up onto Li’s shoulders and curled her tails around his neck so her furry body would stay out of the rain. It was cute, and way too intelligent to be a normal animal reaction.

“She’s not really just a fox, is she?” Jet said, looking directly at Li.

Li gave him a look, golden eyes sparkling with mirth, smirked, and strode out from under the train station roof into the rain. Bastard. Jet snickered and followed after, grimacing as the steady drizzle began to dampen his clothes. He should’ve bought a hat or borrowed one of those fancy umbrellas or something.

The wind began to pick up with the increasingly heavy rain and Li picked up his pace. At one point, Li glanced back over his shoulder to be sure Jet was still there. It was odd and slightly offensive. Did Li seriously think a little rain and wind would slow Jet… down… Why was Li
running? What the- And yes, that was definitely a smirk Li shot him from underneath that ridiculous straw hat. That bastard! Well, if Li wanted a game, who was Jet to deny him?

Oh, it was on!

Jet grinned and ran after the boy. He took extra care to step into every single puddle he came across. If he splashed a few pompous rich Middle Ring ladies, then oh well. Not like he'd ever realistically see them again. Right now, he was hunting and nothing mattered but catching his prey. If only Li knew what he was doing to Jet.

Damn fucking Spirits, Li was fast. Even holding that straw hat firmly on his head so it didn’t fly off didn’t seem to do anything to inhibit Li’s flying feet. Wait, was that laughter? Spirits, was that Li laughing?

Wow.

Jet wasn’t paying much attention to where they were or where they were going. He just knew he was soaking wet from the now pouring down rain that was falling sideways and there was lightning and thunder and Li was still laughing and showing no signs of slowing down.

Until he suddenly did and Jet ran into him. Literally.

Li staggered when Jet slammed bodily into him from behind but didn’t fall. Instead, Li shifted his stance and held his ground, refusing to move forward. Well this was anticlimactic. No chance to grab Li and not-so-accidentally pull him into a secluded, covered alley. Yet.

“What-? Li, you can’t just stop in the middle of the road,” he groused, straightening and brushing his wet hair off of his forehead. Was the guy lost? “Come on,” he said, taking hold of one of Li’s wrists and moving towards a nearby building. There was still a chance. Besides, lightning should be a good enough excuse to seek shelter. “Let’s get out of the rai—”

Li resisted the movement, standing still, unbothered by the storm around them, and staring at something ahead. It was storming. What could possibly be so important to keep Li in the middle of the road in a storm? Jet loved storms, but he was not fond of standing in the middle of the road during one. Too big of a chance of getting hit by a rickshaw or cart or a person. Or, he chanced a wary glance at the rooftops, the Dai Li.

Li was shivering. Jet could feel it beneath his hand. He was probably cold. Jet tried again to pull the other boy towards cover, but failed. Bewildered, he lifted his gaze to Li’s face and frowned. Both of Li’s pale gold eyes were wide with shock and his face was unusually pale. Every muscle Jet could see was tense and his feet were a careful distance apart, balanced and ready to fight.

Spirits, even that not-fox on Li’s shoulders was tense, its unseeing eyes locked on whatever held Li’s attention. Disconcerted, Jet followed Li’s gaze, and was unimpressed. A lone woman in a plain but lovely white dress was standing by one of the bridges across an earthbent artistic canal filled with rushing water. Her long black hair hanging loose and free down her back and over her shoulders seemed unaffected by the stormy wind and rain.

Jet could see her clearly despite the increasingly heavy rain. She seemed to shine in the silver-gray light of the storm. A timely flash of lightning lit up the lovely jade hairpin glittering by her left ear and her rose red smile. She was rather pretty. As if summoned by his thoughts, the woman turned her head to them and Jet blushed. Wow, she was lovely. She held out her hand towards them and crooked her finger enticingly.
Who was he to turn down an invitation like that?

A hand suddenly gripped his wrist and yanked him back. Startled, Jet tore his gaze from the beautiful woman and looked down at his hand. Strange. Hadn’t he been holding Li’s wrist? Not the other way around? Since when did that change? Not that he was complaining.

“Not that way,” Li murmured, his voice barely audible over the rain and crack of thunder.

“Why?” Jet asked, turning back to where the woman stood. “If she wants to stand out in the rain like you, then it’s not my prob… lem… Where did she go?”

She was gone, as if she’d never been there. Okay. She probably got smart and went inside. Like a certain other someone should do. Or at least find a secluded enough alley that would keep them out of sight. Pity really. She had been rather attractive.

He stumbled when Li suddenly pulled him towards a group of large buildings to the right. Jet tugged experimentally, but Li’s grip was firm and unforgiving. Jet barely had time to clear his mind enough to form words before Li kicked in the main door and yanked him inside after him.

Not exactly where Jet wanted to go, but hey. He wasn’t going to complain. Much. There would always be other storms.

When Jet stumbled unceremoniously inside the building, he was greeted by several curious glances and more than a few disgusted looks. Jet didn’t let it bother him. A glance at Li, and he snickered. They were both practically dripping wet from head to toe. They were undoubtedly an amusing sight to see.

Hell, Li was positively sinful with his dark green and brown robe and pants soaked through. And Jet was absolutely positive Li had no idea.

Shaking his head, Jet ran his fingers through his hair so it was out of his eyes, ignoring the annoyed murmurs from the young people nearby. Li was a bit more polite. He removed his hat, shaking it out by the door, before hanging it over his back again. The not-fox perked up, shook herself, and promptly hopped soundlessly down onto the nearest table.

“Excuse me,” a young woman with an immaculately painted face said. “An-

“Call her an animal and I swear I’ll let her do whatever she wants,” Li snapped, aiming a rather impressive glare at the woman.

Jet whistled lowly, impressed. Then the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and he shivered. Somehow, he suspected it was not due to the cool damp from the rain. The woman was staring at the not-fox in shock. Her mouth immediately slammed shut and she ducked her head to continue her writing.

Zenko plopped down on her rump, curled her tails around her feet, and turned her head to Li, cocking it just so in the perfect picture of innocence. Jet called bull-bearshit. No way was that the face of innocence. Jet would know. He’d seen that exact expression on himself when he saw his reflection in the water. Tricksters knew tricksters.

What by Koh’s blue balls was that thing?

And why was Li still shivering?

“Hey,” he said, leaning close to the other boy. “What’s wrong with you?”
Golden eyes met his for a moment before sliding to the closed door they’d just come in through. Li gulped, and that wasn’t arousal. That was fear. Jet narrowed his eyes suspiciously. He was missing something. Again.

“We should stay in here for a while,” Li said eventually. “At least until the rain eases up.”

“You’re dodging the question,” Jet said, studying Li’s countenance more closely. He was definitely missing something and he would be damned if he didn’t find out what it was. He was really getting sick and tired of that feeling.

“Shh!” someone hissed nearby.

“Piss off,” he snapped.

Li snorted and began walking away from the door and further into the building. Oh, woah. This must be the library. It had to be. The place was enormous and airy and full of scrolls and were those books?! Jet had only ever heard of them back in the forest. He’d never actually seen one. There were hundreds here easy. And those were just the ones that he could see.

Man, no wonder Li wanted to visit this place. Jet didn’t blame him one bit. He wasn’t big on reading much besides wanted posters and the occasional ‘borrowed’ scroll, but he was impressed. The not-so-innocent not-fox leapt silently off the table and trotted ahead of Li towards the aisles of books and scrolls. A warm, damp hand encircled Jet’s wrist and pulled him behind Li. Together, they followed Zenko down the aisle by the wall until they were far enough away from people to talk quietly without being shushed.

Li was still shivering.

“Li,” Jet said, twisting his hand so he now gripped his friend’s wrist and planted his feet to stay put, “what’s wrong?”

The other boy tugged his arm half-heartedly, sighing when he couldn’t break free right away.

“I’m fi-”

“Say ‘fine,’ and I’ll do whatever I want,” Jet said firmly, playing on Li’s warning from earlier.

He got a glare for his trouble, but it was nowhere near as biting as the one that rich woman got. This one had the brittle edge of fear dancing along the fringes. He glanced at the not-fox and grimaced.

After a few seconds, Li gave in. “You probably wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” he muttered, leaning back against the bookcase, reaching up with his free hand to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“Try me.” Li was not getting out of this one. Jet wouldn’t let him.

“That woman…” Li began, his words coming out slow and stilted. “You shouldn’t go near her.”

Jet frowned. “Why not?” he said, furrowing his brow in confusion. “She was pretty enough. Besides,” he added wryly, “she wasn’t the only one standing out in the rain.”

“Don’t go near her, Jet,” Li hissed, capturing Jet’s earthen brown eyes with his own molten gold. “If you see her, run.”

“Why?” Jet demanded. “What did she do to you? Do you even know her?”
“I don’t have to,” Li said fiercely, catching himself before his voice rose to high. “No one does. You just have to be fool enough to come to her. She’ll kill you if you do.”

This was ridiculous and Jet still didn’t know “Why?!”

Li blinked, looking honestly confused by Jet’s demands. “Di… You don’t know what she is?” he asked, leaning back in shock.

“No if you don’t ever tell me, no,” Jet snapped, leaning into Li’s personal space. Seriously, enough with the cryptic talk and just-

“She’s a Woman in White,” Li said, eyes still wide and uncomprehending.

The straw fell from Jet’s slack mouth. “There’s no such thing,” he whispered. “Those are legends.” He breathed a laugh. “Legends. Like Hei Bai, and Oma and Shu, and the Av-”

“They’re real,” Li insisted, tightening his grip on Jet’s wrist. Spirits, Li had sharp nails. “She’s real, and she will kill you if go to her.”

This couldn’t be happening. What was this world coming to? First the Fire Nation, then the Avatar, then that Spirits-possessed not-fox, and now a Woman in White. This world was insane.

“Jet.” He looked up to Li’s open, earnest gaze. “Promise me, you won’t go near her if you see her again.”

What was he supposed to say? He could barely even think right now let alone-

“Jet,” Li said, grabbing a handful of Jet’s shirt collar. “Promise me.”

...How did anyone say ‘no’ to those baby sparrowhawk eyes?

Fire Nation eyes.

It wasn’t the first time Jet had ever seen Fire Nation gold or amber in an Earth Kingdom youngster. Things happened during war. Not all soldiers took ‘no’ for an answer. But he’d never found any of those youngsters even remotely interesting.

Li though…

No one had ever made him promise to stay safe. They’d wished him luck, told him to stay out of trouble, or not to cause trouble. Not one had ever made him promise to stay safe.

Li, his Fire Nation gold eyes wide and guileless, did.

“I promise,” he whispered.

He still crossed his fingers behind his back. Just in case. There was no way Jet was going to let an opportunity to solve the puzzle that was Li slip through his fingers. Movement behind Li caught his attention and he glanced over at it curiously.

Three tails swished as sightless eyes bored straight into him. For some reason, Jet felt like a child caught with their hand in the rock candy jaw.

Koh’s balls. What was that thing?
Research

Chapter Summary

In which Li is frustrated, Jet is amused, and a stranger is annoyed but intrigued.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here's the next update. As an FYI, ‘Tengfei’ is the name I've given the canon character who appears in the second half of this chapter. I promise he's canon. Plays a rather important part in the canon storyline of the last couple episodes of Book 2 as well, even if his continued presence was swept under the rug. I've decided he deserves more, so he's here. Hope you like him.

Li didn’t really know what he was doing. Well, that wasn’t exactly true. He had a vague idea of what he felt he should be doing, but nothing particularly clear. All he knew for certain was that he wanted to find anything and everything he could on the Fire Nation and firebending. Indirectly, of course. There was no war in Ba Sing Se after all. No need to attract attention.

That glassblowing book from earlier apparently didn’t have much information on the Fire Nation other than the few pictures Li could find in it. Even Zenko’s efforts were proving to be fruitless. That was probably the most discouraging part of this whole thing. Zenko was a Knowledge Seeker for The Knowledge Spirit. If she couldn’t find what she needed in this library, then it probably wasn’t here.

There is no war in Ba Sing Se. Apparently that meant there was no Fire Nation in Ba Sing Se either. Well, he was living proof of how wrong that statement was.

At least Jet wasn’t complaining, much. Although, there really was only so many times anyone could look at a map of the world without going crazy. Even if some of the information was wrong.

...although how he knew that for certain…

At least Zenko had been able to help him track down a few useful books. They all referenced the Fire Nation indirectly, or dealt with fire and its various uses. Glassblowing, forging and metalwork, armor, minting, various massage styles, a handful of legends, and a burn treatment manual. The burn treatment manual was obviously a while overdue, so that was useless. Out of all of them, only the glassworking, forging and metalwork, and legends were proving to be of any use to him.

Naturally, none of them mentioned a phoenix or Agni. Li wasn’t surprised, but he was still disappointed. Even the books about legends didn’t have anything about Agni or phoenixes. They were full of Earth Kingdom spirit tales, though. But most interesting were the ones Zenko was looking through. Curious, Li leaned over in his chair so he could read the book Zenko was reading better. It was talking about the Woman in White.

He sighed. “Is there something I should know?” he murmured, knowing she would answer in her
own way if she wanted to.

Her tails twitched and she nudged a particular section on the page with her nose. Li followed her gaze and frowned. This was… familiar. He must have learned this before. That meant someone must have taught him. Most likely the same person who taught him how to doodle, judging from that badly drawn scribble of what the author of this scroll implied was a spell.

Not that that was even remotely a spell. It was clearly done by an amateur. The word ‘spell’ wasn’t drawn correctly, the characters were sloppy, and the writing made no sense whatsoever. It was just a bunch of words designed to look good and mean nothing. Pathetic.

Li blinked, caught off guard by the sheer rush of disdain that flooded his mind. Where had that come from? It had been fierce and surged through him before he even had the chance to stop and think clearly. He flinched back from it as if burned. If that was from his past, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to understand.

Even if that ‘spell’ was a disgrace.

An insistent paw bopped his arm, breaking through his thoughts and drawing his gaze. Zenko was staring at him with her closed eyes, head cocked curiously, as if waiting for something. Waiting for what?

One of her ears twitched and Li glanced up and saw Jet watching him, straw twitching as it was chewed. How long did it take to chew a single sprig of straw anyway? Or did Jet have extras? He probably had extras.

And Jet was still staring at him. Li leaned back, his lone eyebrow drawing low over his good in confusion. Why was Jet staring? Nothing interesting was happening.

Oh. Li flushed. Agni, he had completely forgotten Jet was even here. He’d been so caught up in his studies that he ended up ignoring his friend. How could he be so rude? His Mother would smack him good for that.

Why did that thought hurt so much?

“Li? What’s wrong?”

Jet was sitting up now and staring at him with narrowed brown eyes. It took Li a moment to realize his good eye was tearing up. Spirits, why now?

“Nothing,” he said.

Jet narrowed his eyes further in suspicious disbelief. It was the truth, sort of. What was Li supposed to say to a question like that anyway? He felt sad but he didn’t know why? He apparently had a mother before Ying whom he couldn’t remember to save his life and something intrinsically tied to that memory made him sad for some reason?

Yes, that would go over very well.

Jet plucked out his straw and said in a flat, deadpan voice, “You really can’t lie. Try again.”

Do not hit him. He was just worried. Li took a deep breath and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest and sulking. “It really is nothing,” he insisted.

Jet blinked lazily, stood from his seat, and sauntered around the table to Li’s side. And promptly
“What was that for?!” Li hissed, rubbing his aching head. As if the headache already pulsing at his temples was bad enough. “Fuck your skinny ass with a maggotty daikon radish, Jet. That hurt.”

Jet didn’t say anything. His eyes were wide, his mouth was hanging open, chewed straw fallen to the floor, and he was staring at Li like he’d grown another head. Li glared right back and pressed his palm against his aching head, rubbing his temples. Agni, that had really hurt. Jet had impeccable aim. Now the headache that had been a distant annoyance was back, pulsing in the forefront of his mind. Li gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, letting his forehead rest on the scroll on the table in front of him.

Then he heard the oddest sound. Dumbstruck, he lifted his head and looked up at Jet in utter disbelief. The guy was laughing. Actually, no. He was falling.

Li’s good eye grew wide as he watched his friend lean over clutching his belly as he laughed. When Jet staggered and tried to grab the corner of the study table, Li attempted to reach out to help. But he wasn’t fast enough. Honestly, he doubted Jet noticed. The other boy was too busy sitting sprawled on his butt on the library floor laughing himself stupid.

What could possibly be so funny right now? Jet hit Li! How was that funny?

“Th-That was the…” Jet collapsed into barely controlled snickers. “...the absolute best curse I have... ever heard in my entire life.”

Jet kicked Li’s chair with his foot, nudging it back with Li’s still in it. Startled, Li tensed and grabbed the edges of his chair seat with white knuckles hoping he didn’t just overbalance backwards and fall. He began looking around frantically to make sure no one was coming because Jet laughed loudly and this was a library!

Awkwardly, Jet got to his feet and slapped a hand on Li’s shoulder in a friendly, enthusiastic manner. “You were absolutely a sailor in your past life,” he joked, chuckling.

Past life. Li grimaced. That was more accurate than Jet probably realized.

“I’ve only heard curses like that from them,” Jet continued, oblivious to Li’s discomfort. “You have got to teach me some of those.”

Jet’s hand came up and cupped Li’s scarred cheek, patting it. It was a casual gesture. Gentle. Innocent. Guileless. No harm meant. It might have even been a caress had they been somewhere else.

So why did terror spear Li in the heart, locking his joints, and tensing his muscles? Heat. All he felt was heat. Fire. Fist. He couldn’t dodge.

_She was born lucky. You were lucky to be born._

Agni, he was so hot. He could feel the heat of his own blush burning his cheeks. Even his hands felt hot. It felt like there was a furnace burning him alive from the inside out. He felt like he was going to explode if he couldn’t find a way to soothe the blaze and cool down. Except he couldn’t cool down. He didn’t know how!

The pressure was increasing and he still didn’t know what to do except gasp for air and grip his chair. He needed to let the heat out. It would ease the pressure of his emotions and calm him.
Do not firebend. He was in the Earth Kingdom. He was in Ba Sing Se. If he bent a flame where someone could see, Li had little doubt he would be arrested and executed as a member of the Fire Nation.

He squeezed his eyes shut as the pressure began to clench around his lungs making it difficult to breathe. He gasped, feeling sweat bead on his forehead. He felt so hot. He couldn’t bend. Not that he could remember how even if he could. Be he couldn’t bend. He wouldn’t. Not even by accident. He wouldn’t let himself.

Fur brushed his scarred cheek and a wet nose touched his chin in a nuzzle. Z-Zenko. Zenko, it hurt. He was burning alive. Make it stop. Please. His head was going to explode and he couldn’t breathe.

Four light paws landed delicately on his lap and his hackles rose. Her eyes must be open. She was trying to talk to him. He had to open his eyes to hear her. To understand. To… He felt so heavy. His head was… He couldn’t think… Couldn’t breathe.

This was not what he’d been expecting when he’d taken the day off. He had been hoping to have a slow, lazy day reading a good scroll in a quiet corner of his home with a cup of freshly brewed green tea with ginseng. He had no family to speak of and very few true friends. But he wasn’t necessarily disappointed. He enjoyed having time to himself.

Tengfei had intended to leave earlier but was waylaid by the rain. Not that he was complaining, much. It would have been nice to have a good cup of steaming hot tea while reading his chosen scrolls, but this wasn’t a problem. Besides, rainy days were always best for reading.

Nevertheless, he had shrugged the mild annoyance off and sought out a bench by one of the Ba Sing Se library windows to use the soft, silvery light filtering through the rice paper to read by. He’d habitually reached up to adjust his hat, only to feel nothing under his fingertips. Snorting at his slip, he’d settled down on the cushion and leaned back against the wooden bookcase.

He had been comfortable for almost a full candlemark or so. He’d just come to the interesting part when loud, obnoxious laughter jerked him cruelly back to reality. Frowning in distaste, Tengfei sat up and looked around for the guilty party. They sounded close. He tried to ignore it and go back to reading, but the laughter became words and the volume remained annoyingly loud.

"Oma and Shu," he muttered in frustration.

He rolled up his scroll and stood, knowing he would probably lose his comfortable window seat to someone else. Grumbling, he stalked up the book aisle in the direction of the laughter. Then the laughter changed pitch, cutting off abruptly and becoming worried pleading.

“Li. Li, what’s wrong?”

He picked up his pace and stepped into the clear area full of study tables. There were only two people here, but they were definitely the source of all the noise. These boys may have been the source of the noise, but they definitely weren’t laughing anymore. In fact, only one boy was still speaking. The other was sitting still and stiff in the chair looking very much like he was ill.

“What’s going on?” Tengfei demanded, keeping his voice low but stern.

The boy with a messy brown mop for hair shot him a quick glance before focusing his full
attention back on his friend. Not that Tengfei could blame him.

“I think he’s having a fit,” the boy said curtly.

Tengfei moved closer to the tableau, pushing his green and brown sleeves up. “Let me see,” he said firmly.

The brunette stepped aside so Tengfei could have a better look at the stricken young man in the chair. The movement drew the attention of the thing in the ill boy’s lap. Startlingly brilliant blue eyes turned to him and Tengfei’s breath caught. The eye contact didn’t last for more than a second, but it was enough.

:Help him:.

What was a Spirit doing involved with two boys?

“What the-” the brunette boy cried, pointing at the Spirit perched on the stricken boy’s lap.

“Knowledge Seeker,” Tengfei answered, eyeing the stunned boy in mild surprise. “You didn’t know?”

“I mean obviously she wasn’t just a fox,” the boy said, stumbling over his words. “But it- not- What the fuck is a Knowledge Seeker?!”

“A Spirit,” Tengfei said, stepped between the brunette and his ill friend.

He heard a choked sound from behind him but ignored it when he received the second shock of the day. The boy in front of him had ink black hair that was cut shorter than his brunette friend’s. A few loose strands stuck to his sweat-damp forehead and to the nastiest burn scar Tengfei had ever seen on a living person.

Refugees then. What were refugees doing with a Spirit?

Swallowing back his questions, Tengfei reached over the Knowledge Seeker’s furred head and pressed a hand to the stricken boy’s flushed forehead, brushing aside damp hair. The boy was burning up but sighed and leaned into Tengfei’s cool hand, instinctively seeking relief.

“Li?” Tengfei called softly. “Can you hear me?”

“How do you know his name?” the other boy demanded, suspicion coloring every word.

“It was hard not to,” Tengfei answered easily. “You were making quite the racket earlier.” He pulled his hand back, wincing when Li groaned at the loss. “Did this come on suddenly?” he asked, studying Li’s flushed countenance.

“I- Yeah. We were joking around, I cuffed him-”

“In the head?” Tengfei interrupted, keeping his voice calm but firm.

“Yeah,” the other boy said. “He cursed me out. I laughed. And then he…”

“Has he ever done this before?”

“I… I don’t know,” the other boy said.

Tengfei tilted Li’s chin up. The boy wasn’t breathing deep enough to be healthy. “Li,” he called
"Can you hear me?" The boy's eyelids twitched. "Do you know what's happening? Has this ever happened to you before?"

Li's eyelids twitched again, but so did his head in a slight shake. No then. The boy was probably terrified, but at least he was still cognizant. Hopefully he stayed that way.

"Can you open your eyes?" Tengfei asked gently. "I need to check your reactions."

Eyelids twitched, but nothing happened. Tengfei rested his hand on Li's scarred cheek to cradle the boy's face before reaching up to encourage the uninjured eye to open. Li tensed, flinching minutely away from Tengfei's hand. Tengfei stilled and narrowed his eyes, deliberately removing his hand from the scar. Slowly, Li visibly began to relax.

"Easy," Tengfei murmured. He carefully placed both hands on Li's shoulders so the boy knew exactly where they were. "Boy," he said, tilting his head back to the brunette without taking his eyes off of Li, "did you touch Li's face?"

There was the soft sound of a gasp and Tengfei sighed at the confirmation. "It's probably a flashback loop," he said. "We need to pull him back to the here and now. He's your friend, right? He'll probably respond more readily to you."

The brunette knelt next to Tengfei, a careful distance from the Knowledge Seeker. "What do I do?" he said grimly.

Tengfei turned his brown eyes to the brunette's. "Call to him," he said earnestly. "Call him, touch him. But do not touch the scar."

The boy met Tengfei's gaze without fear and nodded, nudging him over to take his place in front of Li. Tengfei stood and stepped aside to make room for the other boy, tucking his hands in his sleeves. Noticing his discarded scrolls, he gathered them up and placed them on the study table. He wasn't going to leave these boys until he knew the situation was handled.

He knew how bad flashback loops could be. He'd seen the phenomenon often enough in his fellows. Their job wasn't an easy one on the mind, body, or emotions. He leaned against the table, ready to wait for Li to open his eyes, when he actually looked at the scrolls and books scattered across the surface.

There was a map of the world spread across most of the table, a star map, a glassblowing book, and a scroll of old Earth Kingdom legends and supernatural fauna. The scroll was currently open to a section on spells. He furrowed his lip in disdain. Whoever wrote this scroll had no business doing so. The information was nonsense and...

He lifted his gaze to a pair of old, wise blue eyes and pressed his lips in a grim line.

:Not idly do Knowledge Seekers seek out Humans,: he said.

The fox spirit tilted her snout down in acknowledgement. :True. But I have my reasons, agent.:

:And those would be?:

The Knowledge Spirit cocked its head and opened its mouth in what could only be a grin. :Wouldn't you like to know.:?

Tengfei rubbed his forehead. This was not how he planned to spend his day off. Ever since the Avatar arrived, the spiritual activity of Ba Sing Se had been on the rise.
The Bridge is here?:

Oma and Shu, he forgot Knowledge Seekers could read minds when their eyes were open. The fox spirit made a warbling sound that was suspiciously like a snicker.

:I’m surprised you haven’t noticed,: he said mildly, holding the fox’s gaze.

:My attentions lie elsewhere,: it answered.

:Li:

The Knowledge Spirit nodded.

:Why?: Tengfei pressed.

The fox Spirit snorted and if that wasn’t an answer, Tengei wasn’t Dai Li.

:As long as it does not endanger Ba Sing Se, I won’t interfere,: Tengfei said. :But I am curious why Wan Shi Tong would willingly allow one of his Knowledge Seekers to remain in the company of a Human. I hear he’s rather secretive of his knowledge and those of his house.: The Knowledge Spirit sat down, its three tails curling around its paws. :Wan Shi Tong has given Li a task to complete,: she said.

Not a full answer, but an answer nonetheless. Tengfei would take it. Knowledge Seekers were notoriously wily, but honest. They never lied. They may not tell the whole truth, but they never lied. Tengfei sighed and dropped his gaze back to the ‘spell’ scroll. He was about to look away when a single phrase caught his attention.

Woman in White.

Now why would a young man with a Knowledge Seeker as a companion be researching a Woman in White?

:We came across one on our way here.: What? Tengfei stared at the Knowledge Seeker's eyes. :Where?: he demanded.

The pitch of the brunette’s calls shifted and so did Tengfei and the Knowledge Seeker’s attention. Li was practically slumped in the chair now, held up only by Jet’s firm grasp. But his eyes were beginning to open, so hopefully he was coming to now. Then Li opened his eyes fully, or opened the one that wasn’t scarred into a permanent glare, and Tengfei stiffened.

Fire Nation gold.
In which Tengfei learns a thing or two, Jet is ticked off, and Li is a confused and frustrated turtleduck.

Li could hear the words spoken around him, but it was as if they were filtered through a ship’s thick hull. Muffled and dull. But they were constant and insistent, demanding his attention. A prickle along the back of his neck was all the indication he needed to know Zenko was there as well. He couldn’t feel her fur, but he knew she was there.

She’d promised to stay with him. She wouldn’t leave him now. He needed to come back to her. But also, he knew one of those voices. Jet. Zenko. He needed to open his eyes and let them know he was alright. That he was still here.

He was still so painfully hot, but the pressure was easing off. It wasn’t crushing his lungs anymore but there were still flames licking the inside of his skin. But he could finally breathe! It took more focus than it should have to inhale, hold, and exhale. He did it again. In, hold, out. Slower. In, hold, out. Calmer. In, hold, out.

His racing heartbeat slowed to something less desperate and the pounding in his head eased to the dull, background annoyance it always was. Cool hands touched his cheek and his neck, calloused from swordplay and familiar. Jet. The prickle of Zenko’s eyes was tantalizingly close, almost as close as Jet’s voice. The heat was retreating, vanishing in a veil of smoke. The glowing embers of whatever had possessed him dimmed to a low simmer that was tolerable.

Finally, he found the energy to open his eyes. Jet was right there, deep brown eyes dark and determined. Li blinked blearily and the stern expression vanished, replaced by relief. Then Jet’s face vanished and Li found himself on the receiving end of a tight hug.

Stunned, he tensed, unsure of what to do. Hesitantly, he released his grip on the chair seat, ignoring the way his cramped fingers twitched and ached, and pressed his hands against Jet’s back. Was this correct? Li could only remember hugging Ying and Than. He’d seen friends hug one another on the streets or in the potter’s complex, but he’d never experienced it himself.

...It wasn’t bad.

“Spirits, Li. Don’t do that,” Jet snapped, leaning back and glaring at Li.

“Wha-?” Li balked. “It’s not like I meant to,” he hissed, offended by the suggestion.

Paws landed on his shoulder and furred tails smacked him squarely in the face. It didn’t hurt but it certainly made it clear what Zenko thought of that little episode of his. Her cool, damp nose bumped his scarred ear, licking the shell of it before propping her chin on top of his head. He could feel her throat vibrate with every soft, satisfied warbling purr sound she made.

The prickle of her presence still tingled and he briefly wondered why her eyes were still open. Her tails curled protectively around his throat and her chin shifted, indicating something to his left.
Reaching up to pet Zenko’s tails, he glanced towards his left.

The man standing there was dressed in nondescript brown robes trimmed with a deep green that matched his eyes. His nose was a bit large but not overwhelmingly so. He was clean-shaven and there was the faintest hint of stubble along his chin. A thin scar sliced through the man’s right cheek from just below his eye to just above his jawline. This must be the person whose voice Li hadn’t recognized through the haze of that… fit.

“Who’re you?” he asked.

The man blinked, taken aback, but his lips quirked up at the corners. “Tengfei,” he answered. “Your friend was being rather loud for a library,” he said, glancing significantly at Jet who huffed unrepentantly, “so I came to tell him to keep his voice down. I ended up doing something else.” He sighed. “However, seeing as everything seems to be alright now,” green eyes shifted to Jet once more, “keep your voice down.”

“Hey,” Jet squawked. “If I hadn’t raised my voice before, Li would’ve still been in that…” He waved his hand expressively, “that thing he was in.”

Li’s lone eyebrow lifted as he gave Jet a look. Jet seemed utterly unaffected, even smirking arrogantly.

“You should be thanking me,” Jet said, getting to his feet and resting his weight on one foot and crossing his arms over his chest.

Do not… Agni take it. Hit him. Li looped a foot around Jet’s supporting ankle and tugged sharply. The startled flail and grunt of dull pain when Jet’s bottom hit the floor was satisfying. It even got a quickly smothered snicker from Tengfei as well.

Speaking of, Li stood, praying to Agni that he didn’t wobble. He did. Spirits take it. He did his best to turn the humiliating wobble into a respectful bow, but the tell-tale flush in his cheeks probably betrayed everything.

“Thank you,” he said, straightening and lifting his gaze back to Tengfei.

Tengfei gazed at him steadily, tilting his head slightly in acknowledgement. Green eyes shifted to Zenko and Li dug his fingers into the kitsune’s bushy tail fur.

“I don’t see Knowledge Seekers often,” Tengfei said, “and rarely in the company of a Human.”

Li blinked, his grip on Zenko’s tail fur tightening enough for her to bat his head gently with her paw. Consciously loosening his grip, Li scratched the tail in apology.

“You know what she is?” he asked, intrigued.

Tengfei nodded. “It’s… an area of interest. Although, granted, I don’t get to talk about it often with other people.”

Li nodded sympathetically, noticing Tengfei’s green eyes flicker to Zenko briefly before returning to Li. Well, if Tengfei knew about Knowledge Seekers, then maybe he knew abo-

“Yeah,” Jet said suddenly, leaning heavily on Li’s right shoulder causing him to stagger. “About that.” Brown eyes locked on Li’s gold. “Li, my friend—” oh Agni “—were you ever going to tell me your ‘just-a-fox’ was actually a Spirit?”
Li had the decency to look abashed. “Uh, well, hardly anyone else believed me, so…” He shrugged helpless, unable to shake Jet off. “Besides,” he added indignantly, “it’s not like you didn’t already know she wasn’t just a fox.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know what she was,” Jet said, leaning closer before sighing dramatically. “Geez, why didn’t you just tell me what she was to begin with?”

Li shot Jet a deadpan stare. “Would you really have believed me if I had?”

“Yes.”

...That was definitely a lie. Right? Spirits, Li couldn’t tell.

Tengfei cleared his throat, drawing the the boys’ attention back to him. “If you two are quite through,” he said, “I have a couple questions.” He turned and tapped the section the scroll on the table was open to. “Is there a reason why you’re interested in a Woman in White?”

“Why?” the brunette demanded suspiciously.

He shrugged. “It’s not a subject commonly studied by young people. And,” he added, unsure of what the Knowledge Seeker had already told Li, “I understand you two crossed paths with one on the way here.”

The brunette’s brown eyes widened, immediately narrowing angrily. “How the hell do you know that? Were you following us?”

“Jet,” Li said, placing a restraining hand on Jet’s arm still resting on Li’s shoulder.

Tengfei held up a calming hand, palm outward in a peaceful gesture. “The Knowledge Seeker told me,” he said.

“She… told you?” Li breathed, his good eye wide.

The fox Spirit chirped and Li blushed, looking very much like a chastised child. Was is possible the boy could speak to the Knowledge Seeker without those unnatural eyes open? That could be a useful talent indicative of a deep bond. How did these two come to be so close?

“She did,” Tengfei said. “Knowledge Seekers can speak mind-to-mind when their eyes are open.”

Li nodded thoughtfully.


“What about her?” Jet said.

Tengfei sighed internally. This Jet clearly didn’t trust easily.

“We saw her by the canal near the library,” Li said.

What? “You saw her?” Tengfei gasped.
Li nodded.

“Did she see you?” he pressed.

Li frowned but nodded again. His friend Jet had a faint blush in his cheeks. By Oma and Shu, they couldn’t have…

“Did she entice you?” Tengfei demanded urgently, studying both boys closely.

Jet had a passive expression that would make a competitive mah jong player jealous, but Li was hopelessly easy to read. All the blood had rushed out of the golden eyed boy’s face and his grip on the Knowledge Seeker’s tail had tightened again.

“Oma and Shu,” Tengfei breathed, stunned. “You’re still alive.”

That seemed to get Jet’s attention. His brown eyes sharpened, flicking tellingly to Li. Ah, that made sense. Although, judging by the way Li didn’t respond, Tengfei would bet his best hat that Li was completely unaware of his friend’s crush. Poor boy.

“She enticed you then?” he said, looking directly at Jet. “How did you resist her?”

“I-”

“He didn’t,” Li said. “I kept him back. I knew what she was.”

Interesting. “And how did you know that?” Tengfei asked, glancing at the fox Spirit perched on Li’s shoulders significantly. "Did she tell you?"

“She didn’t have to,” Li said. “I just… knew.”

And that was definitely a grin on the Knowledge Seeker’s face. Cheeky fox. Tengfei chuckled, shaking his head in wry amusement. The one time he meets a Natural and they’re already claimed by someone else. Just his luck. Although, Tengfei had never heard of a Natural ever being a non-bender.

Gold eyes.

No.

:He is no threat to you.: Tengfei glared at the wily Spirit. :He’s Fire Nation,: he said angrily, :and very likely a firebender.: The Knowledge Spirit merely cocked her head, blue eyes gleaming, and warbled. :In whom Wan Shi Tong has placed his trust,: she said. :Would you set yourself against a Spirit such as he?:

“Hey.”

:Ba Sing Se-:

:Has nothing to fear from He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things,: the Knowledge Spirit said, lowering her head so her eyes were even with Li’s. :Unless one who acts on the city’s behalf should,: she showed her teeth, :interfere where he should not more than is deemed necessary.: “Hey, what’s your problem?”
Know and do nothing. Or know and act. Tengfei loved his city. He’d spent most of his adult life protecting it from threats without and within. Knowing there was a potential threat within Ba Sing Se’s impenetrable walls and no one was acting on it-

“Are you ignoring me?”

:Besides,: the fox continued, nuzzling Li’s scarred cheek, :you have bigger problems to deal with, I think. The Bridge is no friend of Wan Shi Tong,: Those old blue eyes flashed dangerously. :Be wary of him. His word is ash on the wind:

That… Tengfei flinched in ill-disguised shock. “The Avatar!?” he gasped, forgetting himself and blurring the word out loud. :What could a twelve-year-old boy have done to offend Wan Shi Tong?:

“The Avatar!? What’s that damn brat got to do with this?”

The fox growled. :Lie to his face and steal from his library with the intent to use the knowledge for the Human war after giving his word that he would do no such thing.:

...Oma and Shu have mercy.

“Look, you bastard,” Jet snarled, advancing on the adult angrily. “Stop ignoring us. You want to talk about something? Then do it so we can hear. Or we’re leaving.”

When the man didn’t respond right away, Jet snapped. Fuming, he grabbed Li’s wrist and stalked off muttering low curses to himself as he went. Unfortunately, Li was a formidable force all on his own, despite being a skinny stick of a person. Jet had to all but physically drag Li down the aisle of scrolls behind him and out of the library entirely. Li wasn’t particularly pleased with this turn of events but he wasn’t fighting particularly hard. Jet suspected if Li seriously wanted to get free, it would be laughably easy for him to do so.

The rain had eased to a light fog that lingered by the canal as well as other water sources and green spaces in the Middle Ring. But Jet didn’t pay much attention to it as he continued his frustrated march. His mind was too clouded with anger to think clearly about anything other than getting away before he did something he might regret.

“Jet!”

“What?” he snapped, stopped abruptly and whirling on Li.

Immediately, he regretted his anger. Li hadn’t really done anything. Lashing out at him would accomplish nothing except very likely screw up his life even more than it already was.


Damn, that thing was a Spirit. That explained so much. What were the odds? First the Avatar comes along and practically destroys everything Jet loved and cared for, then Li and his ridiculous Spirit-fox stumble into his life and make him want for the first time since that waterbender girl, then a Spirits-damned Woman in White, and now the Avatar is here in Ba Sing Se…

The Spirit-fox chirped and dropped gracefully from Li’s shoulders to the ground, her eyes shut once more.
“Jet, why did you drag me out of there?” Li said, tugging his wrist free and glaring. “We could have asked him about-”

“I doubt he would’ve said anything useful,” Jet interrupted curtly. “Adults are all the same. They talk, and plan, and act without ever asking the opinion of anyone actually involved in the situation. In this case: us. They just ignore us or treat us like we're not there.” He shook his head. “Really gets under my skin.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to drag me along with you,” Li said, swiping his hand downward sharply in front of him. Huh. The air shimmered slightly where Li’s hand went. The sunlight must be burning the fog away faster than Jet thought.

“No, you’re right,” Jet said, facing Li full and planting his hands on his hips. “I should have just left you with a creeper who just so happened to be nearby, who just so happened to be able to help you, and who just so happens to know about things that go bump in the night like that Woman in White ghost thing that we just so happened to meet right before he got to the library in the first place.”

With a single, deliberate step, Jet moved into Li’s personal space, crowding the other boy. Although it was painfully obvious Li wanted to back away and regain his personal bubble, he didn’t. He held his ground, even if his hands curled into fists and his eyes sparked with defiance.

“I don’t believe in coincidences, Li,” Jet growled. “Especially not when the Avatar is involved.”

Golden eyes held Jet’s stern brown for several long seconds before finally blinking. Still, Li didn’t back down. Actually, it looked like Li was about to explode or something. But instead of exploding, Li’s shoulders hunched up defensively and his face contorted into an amusing mix of embarrassed confusion.

He muttered something that sounded vaguely like “ugh agony” before raising his voice and asking a question Jet never thought he’d hear anyone ask.

“What’s an avatar?”
Admission

Chapter Summary

In which Jet is shocked and intrigued, Li is awkward, and Tengfei has a big decision to make.

Chapter Notes

2/12/18 EDIT A/N: Ok, so I lost the Internet last night while in the middle of editing this chapter. So I had to post it using my phone. I just finished editing it now and I am so sorry about all the errors. I’m so embarrassed. I fixed all the errors that I could find, but if any sees more, let me know.

A/N: Hope this settles some lingering questions from last chapter. Also, I've gotten a few questions about Tengfei and I'll clarify who he is. He's the Dai Li Agent who was intimidated by Azula in the last episode of Book 2 who was then captured by Iroh and interrogated by the gAang to find Katara and Zuko's prison. He was left dangling helpless and tied up and we never heard or saw him again. I think he deserves better. Thus, why he's here.

Feel free to ask me any questions y'all want and I'll do my best to answer them as long as they don't involve spoilers.

No way. There was just no way. How did…

But Li wasn’t lying. Those baby sparrowhawk eyes were glistening with embarrassment and the splotches of red in those pale cheeks were getting bigger and more noticeable with each passing second. Li’s lips were pressed together in a crooked line that was utterly adorable and Spirits, Jet was still trying to grasp the fact that Li had asked what the Avatar was. Who even asked that kind of question?

Li apparently.

“What do you mean ‘what’s an avatar’?” Jet deadpanned.

Li flinched and now his cheeks were glowing like a hot oven. “I mean- I know what an avatar is,” Li said quickly, stumbling over his words in his haste to explain. “But the way you talk about an avatar,” he emphasized, “makes me think it’s not just something that’s…” he gestured vaguely, “a Spirit in physical form like Zenko.”

He really doesn’t know.

Li pointed to the Spirit-fox to prove his point, and got a disappointed snort in reply. Li did a double-take at the fox in surprise.
“Why does that offend you?” he said in growing confusion. “That’s what you are. Technically.” He hesitated. “Right?”

“You really don’t know,” Jet murmured, staring at Li in blatant disbelief. “Have you been living underwater? Everyone knows what the Avatar is.”

Li tensed and whipped his gaze back up to Jet. It wasn’t a flicker this time. The fear and discomfort that had flashed through Li’s golden eyes at the potter’s complex in the Lower Ring earlier today now filled every crevice of Li’s very pale face.

Jet crossed his arms and aimed his best parental glare at the other boy. “What aren’t you telling me, Li?” he said, using the same tone he would use on his kids when he knew they were hiding something from him.

Li said nothing, but his body screamed his desire to run. Like hell Jet would let him. Interesting how the Spirit-fox wasn’t involving herself in this. Hopefully, that meant she was on Jet’s side for once.

“Li?” Jet said, lifting one expectant eyebrow. “I won’t ask you again.”

Don’t lie to me Li, he tried to communicate through his face. I’ll know and I won’t be able to trust you. It can’t be so bad that-

“I don’t… remember.” Li was shaking in the green and brown robes that didn’t quite fit. One of his hands reached up to pick at the straw hat dangling over his upper back and neck.

“Don’t remember what?” Jet pressed, standing his ground. He wasn’t going to let Li slip out of this. “It’s really not impor-”

“It is, though,” Jet insisted, stepping forward so he was crowding Li once more. “You need to tell me. If it’s a secret, I’ll keep it. But if I’m going to help you here, I need to know what’s going on.”

Pale gold eyes blinked in surprise from both Jet’s proximity and the question. “Help me with what?” he asked in genuine confusion.

Really Li? That’s what got his attention? Jet wanted to smack his face in frustration. Taking a deep, centering breath, he tried again.

“What don’t you remember, Li?”

Li’s gaze slid to a spot on the ground behind and to Jet’s right where Zenko had been before returning to Jet’s deep brown eyes. He said nothing, but Jet was fully prepared to wait. Li had him beat when it came to the art of swordsmanship, but Jet had Li beat when it came to patience.

Thin shoulders drooped and Jet was proud his self-control kept him from smirking in victory. That would have definitely ruined the moment.

“Nothing,” Li said, his voice soft like a breeze off of Full Moon Bay.

“Nothing what?” Jet said.

Li held Jet’s gaze for a full couple seconds before sighing. Jet had seen a lot of people in his life, but he had never seen someone wilt like Li did. The boy’s gaze slipped down and his entire demeanor seemed to shrink.
“I can’t remember anything,” he whisper.

“About what?”

“Everything,” Li said in tired exasperation. “I can’t remember anything from before two weeks ago. I just… I just don’t. Every now and then I’ll remember something vague like how to fight with my dao, or how to write correctly, or how to read and understand maps. But I don’t know where I’m from, who my parents are, my name…” Li was shaking now, although from fury or despair Jet didn’t know. “I don’t even know what happened to make me this way. I just remember waking up in a ghost town, half dead, with nothing but my clothes, my bag, and an ostrich-horse that I couldn’t take into Ba Sing Se with me.” Li lifted his hands and stared at his calloused palms. “I couldn’t even keep a simple ostrich-horse,” he murmured.

…

Had this been anyone else, anywhere else, Jet would have called bullshit and made the bastard pay for that pathetically paper thin lie. But this was Li who couldn’t lie to save his life, who cursed like a sailor, and who took everything literally. Li whose face had been half melted off by a firebender’s fist, was as graceful as a cranefish with his swords, and as clumsy as a baby catowl when it came to any kind of social interaction. Li who was currently making the best kicked kitten impression Jet had ever seen in his entire life.

...fuck…

“You’re serious,” Jet breathed. The flat stare he got in return was a very vocal ‘no duh’ even if Li hadn’t actually said it out loud. “How… Wha… How does that even happen?” Jet said.

Li groaned and ran a hand through his short black hair awkwardly before pressing it against his neck. “I don’t know,” he admitted reluctantly. “Like I said, the first thing I remember is waking up in a ghost town with just what I had with me.”

Jet didn’t miss the way Li’s hand twitched downwards towards his chest. He glanced back towards the library to make sure they were alone. Judging from Li’s demeanor, this wasn’t something the boy wanted blabbed for everyone to hear. Not that Jet could blame him. Just to be safe, and because he wanted to, he moved just a bit closer to Li and dropped his voice.

“People don’t just drop unconscious and lose their memories on the regular, you know,” Jet said, taking note of every change in Li’s expressive face. “Were you attacked?”

Li shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“But you think you were.” Jet could see it clear as day in the way Li’s eyes narrowed. “Was it the Fire Nation?”

Gold eyes met his for a moment before Li sighed. “It… would make sense,” he said.

Jet jutted his chin out towards Li’s chest, where Li’s hand had wanted to go earlier. “You were injured then,” he said simply. “Can I see?”
His guess was right on the money. Li’s hand slunk down to his chest before quickly crossing protectively over it. So it was a chest wound then. Those could be notoriously nasty. One strong enough fire blast there could stop a heart.

“N-not here,” Li whispered, pulling his straw hat up onto his head. “Later.”

“No,” Jet said, his voice quiet but firm.

There it was. The spark of defiance returned to Li’s eyes and he glared at Jet. “No.”


Li blinked, thrown by the abrupt change in topic, before giving Jet a flat glare. What Jet didn’t expect was for that glare to suddenly become thoughtful. Pale gold shifted to that too-quiet-to-be-considered-good Spirit-fox for a moment before nodding.

“Deal,” Li said. “After we do what you wanted up here. Away from that canal,” he added with a dark look back at where they saw that ghost. “I don’t want to get involved with murder.”

If Jet had been chewing on his piece of straw still, it would have fallen out of his mouth in shock. “What?” he gasped. “Women in White committed suicide, not murder.”

“Oh. Is that what you were told?”

...Jet did not like that tone: light, absent, teasing. Exactly the same tone he’d used on Li when he found out the guy had no idea what the Avatar was. Touché. Jet rolled his eyes.

“Whatever,” he grumbled dramatically, earning him a tiny smile from Li. “Look, we don’t have to stay up here anymore. I already know what all the excitement is about.”

That seemed to catch Li by surprise. “You do?” he asked. “What is it?”

Jet stared at Li briefly before smirking and slinging an arm around the other boy’s shoulders, enjoying the shocked squawk the move elicited. “Let me tell you a little something about the Avatar,” he began.

He tugged Li forward with him as they moved out into the increasing number of people coming out of their hidey-holes and into the clearing weather. With luck, that creepy guy from the library wouldn’t follow them to the train station.

“He’s the only person in the world who can bend all four elements,” Jet explained, rubbing his thumb absently over Li’s arm. “Every time an Avatar dies, a new Avatar is born. It’s a cycle,” he waved his free hand in a lazy circle, aware of Li’s interested eyes on him as they walked. “He’s this big schmuk with a ridiculous amount of power that the Fire Nation wants dead and who should be fighting with the Earth Kingdom to bring peace back to the world.”

He snorted and Li blinked in surprise.

“But what’s he doing?” Jet growled angrily, remembering a lecture and a waterbending girl with hurt and anger in her eyes as she froze him to a tree. “He’s traipsing around the world messing with pirates, riding Unagi at Kyoshi Island, and being a lazy ass.” He spat on the ground. “He told me and my kids stories about his little misadventures, you know.”

“You met him?” Li gasped, his good eye wide with awe.
Jet couldn’t help but preen, a little bit. He was still angry, after all, so he couldn’t afford to break the mood of the story. But he did like having Li look at him like that. Spirits above -and below, he added, glancing at Zenko trotting by Li’s feet- Li was basically a blank slate. That really did things to Jet’s mind. Damn, the things he could teach this boy…

“Yeah,” Jet said, keeping his voice grim, “I did. He’s a twelve-year-old brat with a moral compass that always points South and who firmly believes violence won’t solve any problem.”

Li frowned. “But that’s-”

“Naïve?” Jet offered. “Stupid? Flowery and unrealistic? Yeah, I know.” He sighed and let his head droop a bit. “Look, I’ve done some things in the past that I regret. I don’t regret the goal, but I do regret the… means I used to reach that goal.”

He reached up to toy with his straw, and remembered it was gone. He huffed and dropped his hand in mild annoyance. He hated not having something to chew on. Something tickled the corner of his mouth and he leaned back and stared cross-eyed at it. A straw?

Surprised, he followed the arm holding the straw back to Li. The other boy’s face was set in an open and earnest expression that quickly dusted red under Jet’s eyes. Jet opened his mouth and let Li slip the straw between his teeth, before grinning and deliberately taking Li’s finger in his mouth too. Just ‘cause.

Oh, and because Li’s reaction was worth every smack he got. The boy froze, his dumbstruck face suddenly blazing bright red like an apple. Jet sucked on the finger teasingly and Li jerked back and smacked the back of Jet’s head with his newly freed fist. Twice. He also got in a good kick to Jet’s shins too.

Still worth it, even though Jet was limping now and could barely keep up with Li’s flustered sprint to the train station. It wouldn’t take much to convince Li to grapple with him tonight. Some hand-to-hand combat would do them both good, Jet thought. Maybe they could grab a cup of tea afterwards too.

Or before. Damn. If Li really couldn’t remember anything before two weeks ago, and he matched the description that old teamaker Mushi had given Jet, then it really was possible that Li was Mushi’s missing nephew. Ying and Than must have found Li and adopted him.

He would have to tread carefully.

“Hey Li,” he called once they reached the station and were forced to wait for the train to arrive. The other boy was still sulking but he didn’t avoid Jet when he fell into step next to him. “Want to grab a cup of tea before we let off some steam at the warehouse?” He tried to make his study of Li’s body language as casual as possible. “I know this really good place in the restaurant district.”

“If it’s Pao’s Family Teahouse, no thank you,” Li said in a snippy voice. “I got kicked out by a guy who called Zenko a dumb animal.”

Oh.

“Was it old man Mushi or the owner, Pao?” Jet asked, watching for a reaction to the names.

“Pao, I think,” Li answered, still avoiding Jet’s gaze.

Good. “You should come with me,” Jet said firmly. “I’ll get us in. If we get on Mushi’s good side, which isn’t hard,” he nudged Li with his elbow but got no reaction, “then Pao won’t have a choice
but to let us stay. I get the feeling Mushi’s really the whole reason that place is still up and running. They run that poor old man to the ground, I swear.”

Still no reaction from Li.

“They might even be hiring,” Jet added, toying with his new straw. “I hear serving tea is easier than making pottery.”

Yes, he could feel that sullen glare and no, he didn’t mind it one bit.

Tengfei let the boys go. He knew their names and had a fairly good idea how to find them if he needed to. But right now, he needed to think. He served Ba Sing Se and Long Feng. He, like all of the Dai Li, had been trained to identify Fire Nation citizens. Those of Fire Nation descent but with mixed blood -this was a war after all, and both sides were guilty of certain unspeakable crimes- tended to have eyes that were a shade of amber close enough to pass for brown. From Tengfei’s experience, very few of those people had ever been firebenders.

It was the ones with lighter amber eyes, eyes like Li’s, who had strong Fire Nation blood, or were purebred Fire Nation. The chances of finding a firebender among those numbers was significantly higher. And judging from the scorched fingermarks on the undersides of the chair Li had been gripping like his life depended on it, Li definitely fell into that category.

But Li had a Knowledge Seeker’s protection and the trust of one of the most powerful Spirits aside from the Great Spirits like Yu Huang or Oma and Shu themselves. Wan Shi Tong tended to remain passive and collect knowledge and information, rarely involving himself in the world outside of his library in the Si Wong Desert. But cross him and the price was high.

If the Knowledge Seeker was to be taken at her word, and there was no evidence to suggest she shouldn’t be, then the Avatar had not only made a promise to Wan Shi Tong that he had never intended to keep, but had then gone so far as to steal from the Spirit. Tengfei was almost certain he knew that that very information was why the Avatar and his companions were so adamant about meeting the Earth King in person.

Oma and Shu, this was a mess.

On the bright side, he finally had a lead on the string of deaths tied to the elusive Woman in White. The Dai Li had been hard pressed to find anyone who had seen her let alone survived an encounter with her. They knew she tended to haunt the canal by the Ba Sing Se University, but not why.

There had to be a connection somewhere. There were no reports of missing people. At least, no reports of missing people who weren’t vanished. For that reason, the Dai Li had been forced to rely on questionable descriptions of her to track down her identity. It hadn’t been easy.

That these two boys had not only seen her, but were enticed by her, resisted, and survived... That was a first. Tengfei had no doubt his comrades would be itching to get every drop of information out of Jet and Li that they possibly could. But that could lead to them discovering Li was a Natural. Normally, finding a Natural meant a possible recruitment. But in this case, it would more than likely lead to Li’s death and Jet’s mind bent to forget.

That would inadvertently lead to the Dai Li and subsequently Ba Sing Se drawing the Knowledge Seeker’s ire which would bring Wan Shi Tong down on their heads. Tengfei was fairly certain Long Feng could handle a band of angry Knowledge Seekers, but a Spirit on par with Wan Shi
Tong was not disturbed idly.

The Avatar might be convinced to join in the fight on Ba Sing Se’s side, but he was already on bad terms with Wan Shi Tong. If the Avatar began fighting Spirits then the balance of the world would be thrown even further askew.

Damn it.

This was not what Tengfei needed today. Or ever, for that matter. This was all one big Spirit-woven mess and he wanted no part in it. Pity he was already six feet under. So the question remained: know and do nothing, or know and act?

With the army dealing with the remains of the last Fire Nation assault on the Outer Wall, with a cleverly designed drill of all things, and rumors the Fire Nation’s own Fire Princess had been behind that attack, the safety and security of Ba Sing Se was the Dai Li’s number one priority. One Fire Nation boy working for Wan Shi Tong who hadn’t done anything to specifically attract the attention of Long Feng or the Dai Li would easily be expected to slip through the cracks.

Anonymous tips from prayer requests left at the numerous shrines scattered across the city often led the Dai Li to the latest hotspot of activity, be it criminal or spiritual. If Tengfei happened to find a particular prayer request tucked in the drop box one night while on patrol, no one would bat an eye.

With luck, Li and Jet would be left to their own devices.

As long as the Woman in White kept to her little canal stalking, then she could be somewhat contained until the Dai Li could finally deal with her permanently. However, if her influence spread to other parts of the city…

Spirits above, don’t let that happen. Tengfei could only imagine the body count. They needed to find out where the murdering ghost’s body was so they could end this mess before it got worse. If they found out what drove her to suicide in the first place, other than the obvious infidelity of her partner, then perhaps they could vanish them and gain a new set of eyes in the Middle Ring loyal to the Dai Li and Long Feng.

Perhaps.
Chapter Summary

In which Li gives in and Jet gives a warning which Iroh doesn't heed... exactly.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Just a couple quick things. First, yerba mate is pronounced yer-bah mah-teh. It's a tea that has a compound in it that's chemically similar to caffeine and acts the same way as caffeine, but isn't caffeine. For example, I regularly drink +6 cups of green tea a day. No, I'm not kidding. So I'm pretty good at handling some caffeine. Yerba mate made me start shaking after 1 cup. Think about that... Now imagine Zuko, or even worse, Jet on that stuff.

Yeah.

Second, lemon balm is a tea recommended to help with insomnia due to heartache and worry, among other things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

This was a bad idea. Li knew it. Just looking at the tea house made him annoyed. Well, more annoyed than he already was. He had no desire to draw any more attention to himself than was absolutely necessary.

Unfortunately, he glanced at the kitsune standing expectantly at his feet waiting for him to make a decision, Zenko was with him. Li didn’t regret Zenko remaining by his side for an instant, but he didn’t want to be kicked out of another place just because of her. It was hardly fair to her. She was a Knowledge Seeker. She needed to learn. If she was kicked out of every establishment they entered, then how was she supposed to learn anything new and gain another tail?

Zenko’s gray-black ears twitched and she cocked her head adorably. Sighing in defeat, Li crouched so Zenko could climb into his arms and make herself comfortable before standing and turning to Jet. The other boy had been acting oddly since learning of Li’s memory… problems. But at least Jet had taken him at his word and not rejected him.

Still, there was something about the way Jet was acting, wary but determined, that set Li’s nerves on edge. It was almost as if Jet was anticipating something. What could possibly happen at a teahouse? Teahouses were boring places where people had a cup of tea, maybe talked, and left. Nothing more.

Right?

Reluctantly, Li allowed himself to be herded into the teahouse by Jet. Zenko curled up in Li’s arms, her warm furry body pressing comfortably against his chest and her tails dangling limply over his sleeves. The teahouse was just as pleasantly dim as Li remembered, if perhaps a bit more
busy. Maybe it was the time of day.

A handful of heads turned to the new arrivals curiously, and lingered when they saw the scar on Li’s face and the gray-black fox napping pleasantly in his arms. Li frowned and instinctively backed up a step, only for Jet to grab him by the arm and drag him over to one of the tables with a couple empty seats.

“Good afternoon, fine lady,” Jet said, bowing dramatically much to Li’s chagrin. “Would you mind terribly if my companion and I sat here?”

The older woman looked up from her cup and shot Jet a wry glance before settling on Li, who blinked in surprise.

“Roulan?”

The woman snorted and grinned. “Finally took my advice, I see,” she said, waving to the empty bench across from her.

Immediately, Li sat down and made himself comfortable. He held still while Zenko stood in his lap, walked in a circle, and curled up in an adorable ball of fluff. A soft smile worked its way onto his face as he ran his finger through the fur on Zenko’s head and back.

“Actually,” Li said, lifting his gaze back to Roulan, “I tried to come here after I met you earlier, but I got kicked out.” He grimaced in embarrassment.

Roulan lifted an eyebrow and ran her sharp green eyes up and down Li’s form in disbelief. “Kicked out?” she repeated. “You? I find that hard to believe.”

“You two know each other?” Jet said, leaning an elbow on the rough wooden table and gesturing between Roulan and Li.

“I helped his aunt give birth on the ferry,” Roulan answered, sipping her tea primly.

A grin spread across Jet’s face before he burst in loud cackles. “Well, they say all roads lead to Ba Sing Se.” He extended his hand to Roulan and said proudly, “The name’s Jet. Nice to meet you.”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” Roulan said, sipping her tea and eyeing Jet with dry amusement instead of grasping Jet’s offered hand.

Jet just shrugged and stretched outrageously, dropping one arm over Li’s shoulders. Li stiffened minutely at the contact before relaxing with a tolerant sigh. Roulan studied the two of them over his tea cup and snorted.

“You were saying something about being kicked out,” she said, turning her attention back to Li. “What did you do to get kicked out? Stumble into the wrong table?”

Jet had to slap a hand over his mouth to smother the cackle clawing at his throat. Li looked fit to murder Roulan with his disgruntled glare if it weren’t for that dreadfully telling blush. Damn, Jet didn’t even know this woman and he liked her sense of humor. Li really was much too easy to tease.

“The owner, Pao, called her an animal and told me to leave,” he grumbled, dropping his gaze to the
Spirit-fox in his lap.

Li’s lone eyebrow crinkled in remembered distress, and Jet frowned. He plucked the straw from his mouth and poked Li’s cheek with the end that hadn’t been in his mouth. Startled out of that spiral of dark thoughts, Li flinched and stared cross-eyed at the straw as if it had personally offended him. Pale gold eyes stared at Jet’s brown, obviously weirded out.

Jet chuckled in amusement, biting the straw again and leaning against the table comfortably. “Don’t mind him,” he said to Roulan, gesturing to a confused Li. “He’s a bit prickly when it comes to Zenko.”

Roulan hummed and began to speak before her attention was pulled to someone approaching the table from the kitchen. Instantly alert, Jet followed Roulan’s gaze with the practiced ease of a trickster and breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn’t Mushi, yet. Good. Jet wanted to have a word with the old man first. He’d just gotten distracted before he’d had the chance. Best to remedy that now while he was thinking about it.

“Be right back,” he murmured.

Getting to his feet, he patted Li’s straw hat and tugged it off his head so it dangled between Li’s shoulder blades. They were inside. There was no need for Li to keep wearing that hat. Even if it did make him look dorky and cute. Snorting, Jet tucked his hands in his pockets and started to walk to the kitchen.

Started to.

“You again.”

Well now. That didn’t sound like the best way to welcome a customer. Jet paused mid-stride and turned to see Pao standing stiffly pointing a spindly finger at Li’s chest and glaring.

“I told you no animals allowed in here,” the thin man huffed. “Either take your pet out or leave.”

Shit.

“Relax Pao,” Roulan said, sipping her tea calmly. “Neither of them are causing any trouble.”

“Rules are rules,” Pao insisted.

Jet shifted his straw from one side of his mouth to the other and strolled back to the table. He tapped Pao on the shoulder, drawing the teahouse owner’s attention.

“Now, now, listen to the nice lady,” he drawled. “They aren’t causing any problems. Besides, trust me on this, you don’t want to get on her bad side.”

Roulan huffed. “That’s not very hard to do,” she said.

“With all due respect,” Jet said, tilting his head to Roulan but keeping his eyes trained on Pao, “you weren’t the ‘she’ I was referring to.”

That made both Roulan and Pao pause in surprise. Jet grinned and Pao flinched. Why that reaction? Was there something in his teeth? Just to be safe, Jet ran his tongue over his teeth, patting Pao’s shoulder.

“Look,” he said, “just let him stay for one cup of tea. We won’t make a fuss or cause any trouble.
Besides,” he nodded significantly to the kitchen, “I think Mushi would be very disappointed if you sent Li away before he got the chance to say hello.”

Instantly, Pao’s demeanor changed. “Ah, you’re friends of Mushi’s,” he said, clasping his hands together and smiling perhaps too brightly. “Why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

Jet chuckled. “I was going to before you so rudely interrupted,” he said, holding his grin and watching Pao struggle to form a polite comeback. Jet saved him the trouble. “Is Mushi in the back?” Pao nodded. “Good. I need to talk to him right quick.”

Without waiting for a response, Jet patted Pao’s tense shoulder and made his way to one of the two counters separating the kitchen and serving area from the common area where the guests sat. He didn’t have to look to know Pao had moved on to take another table’s order. The man was painfully predictable. Mushi, however…

“Hey Mushi,” he called just loud enough to be heard in the kitchen. This time, he did glance back just to be sure Li was still where he’d left him before returning his gaze to the kitchen entrance. “Hey Mushi, it’s Jet. I got something you should see.”

“One moment, if you please,” a friendly, elderly voice called back accompanied by a finger held out for Jet to see.

Jet twirled his straw with his tongue impatiently, glanced around to be sure no one was really paying attention to him, and slipped behind the serving counters and into the kitchen. It was no surprise to see old man Mushi slaving over three separate kettles. Each kettle held a separate blend of tea that Jet would bet his boots Mushi could identify by smell alone. The man was a tea connoisseur. The Lower Ring was lucky to have him.

“Actually,” Jet said, wincing apologetically when the old man jumped in surprise, “I don’t think you want to wait on this.”

Large, guileless light brown eyes widened in surprise. Then the elderly man’s forehead creased in concern and he replaced the lid on one of the steaming kettles.

“Very well,” he said, rubbing his hands on the rag looped through his belt. “I am listening.”

Jet hesitated long enough to lean back and make double sure Li was still where he left him. He wouldn’t have been the least bit surprised if Li decided to sneak out while Jet wasn’t there to stop him. Li hated being the center of attention. Speaking of which, Jet straightened and crossed his arms.

“Look,” he said slowly, “you told me you were looking for your nephew. Li, right?”

Mushi tensed, his eyes going impossibly wide and watery with hope. “Yes,” he breathed.

This had better be the right decision.

“Before you go jumping to conclusions, there’s something you need to know first,” Jet said seriously. He waited until he was sure he had Mushi’s full attention. “I found a Li that matches your description of your nephew.”

“...But?” Mushi murmured.

The man was smart, Jet thought grimly. He plucked the straw from his mouth and spun in between his fingers. “He doesn’t know anyone by the name of Mushi,” Jet said, studying the old teamaker’s
body language closely. “I’m not going to break confidence with him, but I thought you should know that before you saw him. You know, just in case.”

Mushi hummed, nodding in grim understanding. He ran a hand through his long beard as he sorted through his no doubt racing thoughts. Jet let him for a few seconds before sighing and stepping away.

“I’m not absolutely sure if this Li if your Li,” he said, turning his back to Mushi and sticking his straw back into his mouth. “But he’s my Li. Go easy on him, Mushi,” he glanced back over his shoulder before stepping back out into the common area. “He startles ridiculously easily. Oh,” he added as an afterthought, “and whatever you do, do not piss off the fox.”

“Fox?” Iroh murmured in befuddlement.

He kept a tight lid on his hope and rising excitement. Jet seemed like a good boy, if a bit misguided in his adventures. Iroh had listened to more than a few tales of Jet’s misadventures from his friends Smellerbee and Longshot. It really was interesting what sort of information someone overheard in a place where people felt safe enough to loosen their tongues.

He’d heard a few patrons talk about a strange new boy who was often accompanied by an animal frequently described as a coyote-fox but smaller and fluffier. None of the stories were particularly interesting, but they were somewhat amusing. He’d been absent when the young man in question had visited the teahouse the previous day, but he’d had to listen to Pao complain loud and long about the boy who tried to come in with the animal.

The whole thing was downright outlandish, which was why Mushi was having trouble connecting the stories he’d heard with Jet’s warning. If this Li really was Zuko, than Iroh wasn’t sure what he would do. But if it wasn’t Zuko, just a boy named Li with a cute little animal as a pet, then Iroh would have lost nothing.

Except another piece of his heart. Decided, Iroh turned back to his kettles and patiently checked each one once more. The ginseng tea was finished brewing but the oolong still had a bit to go before the full flavor would be eked out into the hot water. Best to let it sit for a bit longer.

Pouring a cup of fresh ginseng tea into a small ceramic cup, Iroh hummed to himself. Jet would want a cup of yerba mate since his friends weren’t here to stop him. Iroh chuckled. Young people these days. He still remembered the long, painful process of weaning Zuko off of his energetic tea in favor of the more calming ginseng with fond exasperation.

Please be Zuko. Agni, Dragon of the Western Sky, please let this Li be Iroh’s Zuko.

Iroh replaced the kettles and placed both cups of ginseng and yerba mate onto a tray and picked it up. He noticed with trepidation that his hands were shaking. Breathe. In, hold, out. Again. Ah, yes, there. Calm.

Opening his eyes with firm determination, Iroh nodded and stepped out from the wings of the kitchen and into the common area. A quick sweep of the room with his eyes revealed Jet half sprawled across the table on the far left by the front door across from the healer woman. What was her name? Ah yes, Roulan. And next to Jet…

Agni above. Zuko. Even without the distinctive scar, Iroh would recognize his beloved nephew anywhere. Zuko was sitting next to Jet talking with Roulan and running his hands over something
How Iroh wanted to drop his tray and call out to his nephew. But to do so would condemn them both. Breathe in, hold, and out. Li. Zuko was Li. Warmth blossomed in Iroh’s chest, making his heart swell with pride. Zuko was alive. was here. Zuko was safe.

Willing his fingers to ease their powerful grasp of the tray before he bent or burned the metal, Iroh took a deep, calming breath, and strode towards his son from another mother. The closer he got, the more his heart swelled with pride and love. Zuko was talking freely with no hint of the underlying anger and fear that had edged his every word since that fateful Agni Kai three years ago. There was even a faint smile on Zuko’s face. It was everything Iroh ever wanted for the boy.

He noticed the moment Jet caught sight of him. That boy was quick.

“Ginseng and yerba mate,” Iroh said, placing the tray down on the table between Roulan and his dear nephew. “You must be Li,” he said, turning his gaze and a fond smile to Zuko.

Zuko’s expression was open and curious as his pale gold eyes studied the two cups of tea in front of him. “You got me tea?” he asked, reaching for the yerba mate.

Jet snickered and swatted Zuko’s hand playfully away from that cup. “Not that one,” he said. “The yerba mate’s mine. You have the ginseng.”

Zuko balked and Iroh smiled, waiting for the inevitable burst of irritation that was so uniquely Zu-

“But ginseng just tastes like hot leaf juice,” Zuko groaned, following the process of Jet’s cup from tray to mouth in open jealousy.

Mortified, Iroh placed a hand over his heart and moaned. “How can a member of my own family say something so horrible?”

Jet’s brown gaze narrowed and Zuko blinked, his good eye going wide as he stared up at Iroh in surprise. Iroh grinned and waited.

“U-um, do-” Zuko chew his lip anxiously for a moment. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Iroh’s smile slipped. Nothing? Nothing at all?

“You didn’t offend him,” Jet said, nudging Zuko’s side with his elbow hard enough to make the boy flinch. “He’s just teasing you. He’s dramatic when it comes to his tea.”

Grim earthen brown eyes, in stark contrast to the amusement on Jet’s lips, caught Iroh’s dark amber, and Iroh suddenly felt very small and oh so lost. Jet had said it plainly before, hadn’t he?

“Oh.” Zuko lone eyebrow lifted almost to his hairline in an expression Iroh knew his nephew had learned from Lu Ten. “So he’s like you then?”

Jet choked on his tea, coughing and laughing while pounding his chest. It should have filled Iroh with joy to see his son’s favored expression of comical disdain melt from his nephew’s face in favor of a small, shy smile. And it did. But it was tinged with a sadness that was a gaping, endless wound in his heart.

“He doesn’t know anyone by the name of Mushi.”

Agni. Jet had meant that literally.
Jet managed to recover enough to glare and wave a weak hand at Li. “You,” he coughed again, “did that on purpose.”

Zuko snorted and reached for his cup of ginseng tea, sipping it just the way his mother Ursa had taught him. “I’m not the one who choked on hot leaf juice,” Zuko snarked.

Just like Lu Ten.

It hurt. Zuko finally had everything Iroh had ever wished for his beloved nephew, except for himself. Jet had tried to warn him, but Iroh didn’t think...

Movement in Zuko’s lap startled Iroh from his depressing thoughts. Dropping his gaze, partly to hide the tears threatening to spill from his eyes, Iroh was greeted by gray-black fur, three bushy tails, and a pair of sightless eyes that regarded Iroh with an intelligence that did not match the mortal shell the creature wore.

“...do not piss off the fox.”

Ah, but that was no fox. Iroh had seen much through his life, but never had he seen a Knowledge Seeker of Wan Shi Tong in such close proximity to a human. Not by choice, anyway.

*Oh, my dear nephew, what have you gotten yourself into this time?*

Chapter End Notes

*A/N: ...*I feel I should start by saying, sorry not sorry.

Incidentally, I realized that at one point I had Jet say ‘coffee’ instead of ‘tea.’ Obviously, I was craving coffee. XD I don’t remember typing that, but I’m not surprised considering how late it was when I was writing that part. It’s been corrected now as have several other errors. Sorry for the mistakes~
Chapter Summary

In which takes Li and Jet each take a chance, and both pay off.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I thought some fluff was deserved after some feels punches. Gotta get you all sweetened up before I served some more of those, after all.

The tea was surprisingly good, even if it didn’t give him an energy boost. He was going to make Jet pay for tricking him like that. This was probably Jet trying to have an advantage for when they sparred tonight in the warehouse they had taken to borrowing in the evenings recently. If Jet seriously thought something as ridiculous as tea would help him win, Li almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

Mushi was kind and friendly and seemed to go out of his way to engage Li in conversation. It was strange. There wasn’t anything special about the old man that Li could identify, but it was easy to talk to him. He was warm and… safe. Yes, that was the word. Mushi was safe. However odd that sounded, even to Li’s mental ears.

And that smell, the strong scent of tea leaves, it was vaguely familiar. Maybe Li used to work with tea before he forgot. Speaking of which, didn’t Jet mention something about the teahouse looking to hire?

Li hesitated. He hated feeling useless at the potter’s complex, but he simply wasn’t very adept at manipulating the clay like the other apprentices. Nor did he have the patience for the art. He had essentially become a leech on Than and Ying’s limited funds. With little Hope to take care of, Ying was often too busy to meet the typical Potter’s Guild quota.

The guildmaster had significantly lessened Ying’s required time at the potter’s wheel, well aware of her duties as a new mother. But Li knew how badly Ying wanted to work. Not because she enjoyed the work, even if she did, but because their little family needed the money. Li had never made the Potter’s Guild quota and was too far behind the apprentices skill-wise. At least the kilns calmed his mind. Although, Li fidgeted, that was probably due to his innate and as yet unaccessed firebending ability.

An ability that the guildmaster’s son Cheng suspected. Perhaps the only reason Cheng hadn’t reported Li to the authorities yet was likely due to Ying and Than insisting he was related to them, thus granting him the relative safety of an Earth lineage despite the Fire in his blood. Well, that and the fact Li had the uncanny ability to detect when pottery would crack in the kilns. The fewer pots that broke, the more money Cheng could pocket. Keeping Li’s secret was a calculated risk that so far was paying off.
...now there was a thought.

“Are you hiring?”

Jet snorted into his cup and even Roulan was giving him a mildly surprised look over the rim of her cup. Mushi recovered from his surprise the quickest, his face brightening into a huge smile that made Li feel warm and proud.

“We are indeed,” the old teamaker said in a pleased voice. “We have been in need of a waiter for the past week. The increase in customers caught us off guard, although the business is doing well.”

“Due in no small part thanks to you,” Roulan muttered just loud enough for the table to hear.

Jet snorted. “No kidding,” he said with a sneaky grin. “Never went here before Mushi came, but I’ve heard the stories.” He made a comical, overdramatic look of horror before snickering and taking another sip of his tea.

...was… Was Jet shaking? Was he alright?

“Oh, you are too kind,” Mushi said, flashing the healer woman a flirtatious smile that made Li’s eyes burn in mortification. “If you would like,” Mushi continued, returning his full attention to Li, “I could have a talk with Pao. I’m sure he would welcome the extra pair of hands. The pay may not be the greatest,” the elderly man admitted reluctantly, “but it pays for the essentials, which is all a simple man like me truly needs.”

Any pay was useful. Li needed to earn his keep. He would never forgive himself if little Hope got sick and his family was forced to choose between paying for a healer or feeding themselves. The Potter’s Guild gave them a small apartment to call home and their guild share helped pay for food, but every penny was counted and hoarded for the just-in-case scenario.

“I would,” Li said.

In his lap, Zenko lifted her head and rested her nose on the table, deliberately drawing attention to herself. Oh. Agni, Li had completely forgotten and Mushi was getting up to leave-

“Wait!” he called, reaching out and grabbing Mushi’s sleeve, startling the old man. Li flushed in embarrassment and quickly dropped his hand. “I- Um, Zenko would have to stay with me. If she wants to,” he added quickly, glancing down at the fox spirit.

Zenko made a soft warbling sound in the back of her throat and batted him with one of her tails. Silly boy. She would not be separated from him. Even if she was not allowed to remain within the building, there was always the roof. She could always find some mice to play with.

“Tell Pao she’s very good with catching mice,” Li said, hoping that would make his chances of getting on Pao’s good side somewhat better.

Mushi’s muddled brown eyes sparkled in excitement. “Is she now?” he said, giving the kitsune an interested once over. He hummed and stroked his long gray beard. “We have had a bit of a problem with mice these past few days.”

Zenko’s ears flipped up and her tails twitched. She wanted to play and mice made great playmates, until they all left and she was alone and bored again.

Mushi nodded as if answering some unvoiced question. “I’ll be right back,” he said. He gave Li a reassuring smile before turning and hastening after Pao’s retreating back.
Roulan hummed thoughtfully. “He seems quite taken with you,” she said, studying Li. “He’s not usually this invested in guests.”

Really? Huh. Li filed that away for consideration later. He was more interested in the way Jet’s eyes had narrowed at Roulan’s comment, but he chose not to call his friend on it right now. Was Jet really still shaking? Li blinked, dumbfounded, because yes, there was a definite tremor in Jet’s fingertips.

“Jet?” he said slowly. “Are you… shaking?”

Startled, Jet looked up at Li curiously before examining his fingers. “Huh.” He grinned. “Nice. It’s working.”

...Li was scared.

“How’s your headache, Li?” Roulan said, cutting through Li’s stuttering thoughts. “Has it gotten any better?”

“Not really,” Li admitted, choosing his words carefully. “It’s just always there. It got worse earlier today but,” he glanced at Jet briefly, “that was probably due to something else. Why?” he asked, meeting the healer’s gaze.

Sharp green eyes darkened as the healer placed her now empty cup on the table in front of her. “Other than the headache, you haven’t been feeling ill at all, have you?” she pressed.

“Not that I know of,” Li said, shaking his head. He could feel Zenko perk up in his lap, following the conversation with her flicking ears. “Why do you ask?”

The healer frowned and pursed her lips in frustration. After a moment, she shook her head and looked away. “Nevermind. It was just a theory I was considering.”

Li highly doubted that, but he knew when not to press.

“You’re the one interested in a job?” a voice said from right behind Li.

Thank Agni Pao couldn’t walk quietly to save his life, otherwise Li would have practically fallen out of his chair and had a heart attack. At least he got the job. Zenko was even allowed to stay as the teahouse’s unofficial mascot as long as she kept the mouse population at a minimum. As Li walked out of the teahouse holding his brand new work permit, he couldn’t help but wonder at Mushi’s powers of persuasion.

Jet flung himself to the right, ducking a fist aimed for his nose. Smirking, he lashed out with a well-timed jab at Li’s unprotected side, but was greeted by a firm, unforgiving hand held palm out. Faster than Jet could react, Li’s hand snapped closed over his fist, yanked, and twisted so Jet landed hard on his back. Rolling into the impact, Jet kicked at Li’s body with both feet and made contact. Li took the hit, releasing his hold on Jet’s hand and allowing the force to knock him back.

Jet flipped to his feet, adopting a ready stance, and waited for Li to charge him once more. But it never happened. Instead, Jet watched in puzzled amusement as Li shifted from foot to foot, his lone eyebrow pulled low in a deep frown and his eyes clouded as if with memory. It looked like Li was trying to remember a stance, but couldn’t quite get it just right.
At one point, Li’s stance closely resembled a traditional firebending stance that made Jet’s nerves tingle in discomfort. But that stance was quickly abandoned in favor of a low crouch. Li’s right leg was bent almost to the point where he was sitting on his ankle while the left leg was extended out towards Jet. His left hand was clenched into a fist and extended over his left leg while his right was held high above and behind him, palm out and fingers pressed together.

It vaguely resembled a firebending stance, except for the low form. Firebenders very rarely went low, preferring to attack their opponents face to face at eye level. Li held the stance, his pale gold sparrowhawk eyes watching Jet closely, gauging how the former Freedom Fighter was going to respond.

“What style is that?” Jet asked, shaking himself to expel some of the excess energy from the yerba mate tea on top of the adrenaline pumping through his veins. “I’m not familiar with it.”

“Neither am I,” Li answered, holding the pose and waiting, observing.

“What?” Jet gave Li an odd look. “If you’re not familiar with it, then why are you using it?”

Li flushed, but held his pose. “I’m testing it out.”

“Why?”

“Because you won’t kill me if I make a mistake,” Li answered promptly.

And if that wasn’t a grim outlook, then Jet didn’t know what was. Rolling his shoulders and smirking when they made a satisfying pop, he tsked.

“That’s gotta be murder on the thighs,” Jet teased, grinning and bouncing his eyebrows up to his hairline suggestively.

Predictable as always, Li blinked in befuddlement and didn’t respond. So Jet charged, and found himself facedown on the dirt floor stunned, winded, and wondering how the fuck he ended up there. A firm weight pressed against his lower back, pinning him to the ground.

“Again,” Li said, voice curt and focused.

The weight lifted and Jet shook himself before crawling to his hands and knees. He saw Li’s feet step around him until they stood in front and a hand appeared in his field of vision, offering to help him up. Jet took the hand and yanked Li down into the dirt with him.

Stunned, Li was slow to react and Jet took advantage of the lull. He quickly learned that, despite Li’s clear knowledge and grasp of the formal martial art forms, he sucked at the down and dirty rough housing. Li fought fair, Jet didn’t. And Jet knew Li’s weakness.

Li had no chance. He barely managed to get in one good swipe of Jet’s face before both of his arms instinctively flew to his vulnerable sides, inadvertently capturing and holding Jet’s tickling fingers in place. Li kicked and wriggled, flailing around trying to throw Jet off of him amidst gasping from laughter and loss of breath control.

Jet grinned. Ah sweet victory. He barely had to do anything but keep twitching his fingers just so and prevent Li from flipping their positions. As long as he held on just a little bit longer, Li would be too winded to fight back and would just flop in defeat.

Li’s elbows shifted, rubbing Jet’s pinned, tickling hands, desperately trying to force them away. Li’s own hands were too busy gripping Jet’s sleeves at the hem near his collar to aid in the
struggle. Jet snickered and swung his leg over Li’s flailing legs so he straddled the struggling boy’s hips. Li arched and kicked uselessly, gasping and laughing and pleading for mercy!

Not yet. Almost.

It only took a few more long seconds before Li just collapsed into a twitching, laughing, moaning pile of muscle. He could barely move from exhaustion and his breathing was shallow and uneven. Sweat dripped from his forehead and his arms flopped lip and useless onto the dirt on either side of him.

“Victory!” Jet crowed, punching the air with a proud fist.

Li valiantly tried to heave his friend off of him but gave up when he could barely lift his head. He settled for slapping Jet’s thigh weakly and focusing on catching his breath. Jet watched and found it incredibly difficult to tear his eyes away from Li’s open mouth and dry, chapped lips.

He leaned forward, bracing himself by planting his hands on either side of Li’s face, and grinned. “Well hullo there,” he said, winking. “How you doin’ this fine evening?”

“...ugh fuck you,” Li groaned without any heat, a small smile on his face.

“With a daikon radish, yes I heard,” Jet said, chuckling.

“Maggoty daikon radish,” Li corrected, lifting a hand long enough to hold up a finger to correct his friend.

Jet rolled his eyes. “Right, right. A maggoty daikon radish,” he corrected in amusement. “My mistake. And I believe there was something in there about my skinny ass too.”

Li huffed a laugh and shrugged. “You do have a skinny ass.”

“You noticed,” Jet cheered, leering at Li beneath him. “You were looking.”

“I have eyes,” Li said, not missing the implication. “They look. That’s what they do.”

“O-ho, really?” Jet teased, leaning down closer. He was willing to bet the reason Li was still breathless wasn’t wholly due to their exercise anymore. “Is that all they do?”

“Wha- Yes?” Li said, trailing his tone up at the end so it was almost a question. “On a fairly reliable basis.”

“Okay.” Jet ran his eyes up and down Li’s body, deliberately taking his time and enjoying watching Li squirm. “I’m looking and I’m liking what I see.”

That blush was definitely not from exertion.

“You’re ridiculous,” Li grumbled, planting his hands on Jet’s chest and pushing with what strength he’d been able to recover. “Get off me.”

Jet allowed himself to be pushed up to a sitting position and sat heavily on Li’s hips, waiting for Li to figure out how to get out of this situation. Li sat up and blinked when he finally realized the compromising position they were in, blushed deeper, and tried to wriggle free.

“Nah-uh,” Jet said, grabbing Li’s pants and holding him firmly in place. “What’s the password?”

Li balked. “What password? There’s no password! Get up. You’re heavy.”
“Rude,” Jet sniffed. “I have a skinny ass, remember. You looked.” He waggled his eyebrows and Li groaned, batting Jet’s chest in flustered frustration.

“I just looked because you were in front of me,” he argued.

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m serious.”

“Sure.”

Honest!”

“Whatever you say.”

“Jet!”

“Li.”

“Ugh! Ju-mmph!”

Ah, blissful stunned silence. Wide, stunned sparrowhawk eyes stared straight at Jet in shocked awe. Jet grinned.

“I win.”
Chapter Summary

In which Ying is amused, Iroh is not amused, and Li is thoroughly confused.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hope you enjoy this. I'll probably update tomorrow night, but I'll likely have to take Friday off to work on my thesis. So enjoy it for now.

Ying had been preparing for bed after making sure Hope was asleep and Than had done the dishes like he promised he would, when Li came bursting in, flushed, panting, and completely disheveled. Zenko bounded in behind him, flicked her tails with that foxy grin of hers, and strolled over to Li’s futon. The fact the fox Spirit wasn’t panicking soothed Ying’s feathers. Whatever was bothering Li clearly wasn’t as bad as he thought it was.

It still took quite a bit of soothing to calm the poor boy down enough to get a full explanation out of him.

Why was there blood on his hands?

Gently, she clasped her shaking boy’s hands and held them firmly between her own. She brushed her thumbs over the backs of his hands and whispered to him until he stopped shaking and could form complete sentences that made sense.

“Li,” she said softly, mindful of her sleeping daughter and husband. It was a wonder they were both asleep still. Bless that ability to Oma and Shu. “I’m not mad and you aren’t in trouble. Can you tell me what happened?”

Somehow, through the stuttering mess of words, Ying found herself in disbelief. She wanted desperately to laugh, but she knew doing so would make her poor boy collapse in humiliated confusion. So she bit her lip firmly and held herself in check until Li had finished spilling his words onto her ears.

When he was finished, she hummed. “So he kissed you,” she said, unable to keep her lips from twitching upwards, “and you punched him.”

Li’s face burned and his pale gold eyes flashed side to side nervously, avoiding Ying’s gaze. “Well, I didn’t punch him,” he admitted shyly. “I just…” one of his hands twitched, “hit him, in the face,” the red in his cheeks deepened, “with my palm.”

She couldn’t help it. She snorted. Predictably, Li flinched, his good eye wide and his face burning red with mortification. Before Li could slink away and sulk on his futon in the corner next to Hope’s crib, Ying tightened her grip on his hands, holding him captive.
“It’s alright, Li,” she said, offering her boy a warm smile. “I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing because of you. You…” She freed one of her hands to caress Li’s flustered cheek, careful not to touch the sensitive scar. “You are too precious.”

Li stood stock still, unsure of what to do but willing to remain and wait for Ying to explain further. He looked so much like a tiny baby bird ready to fledge but terrified of the dreadful drop. He gulped but remained silent. At least he wasn’t shaking anymore. Ying shook her head fondly and pressed a light kiss on her boy’s forehead.

“You are the only person I know of whose first reaction to being kissed by someone you like is to punch the poor fellow,” she said, chuckling lightly. “Let’s get that blood washed off your hands. Then I want you to breathe, ” Li took a convulsive breath Ying was certain he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, “and sleep.”

Li said nothing, but he nodded and allowed himself to be guided to the stove where Ying kept a bucket of fresh water from the well. She ladeled some water into a clay bowl and dipped a clean towel into it, soaking it and wringing it out. Then she dabbed Li’s hands clean. There was no wound as she first suspected, just the blood from his unfortunate suitor’s no doubt broken nose.

She highly suspected it was that boy who kept stopping by the potter’s complex asking after Li. Jet. What a fascinating boy. She wondered absently how Jet was handling the broken nose?

And what was this about finding a job at a teahouse? With Zenko? What kind of luck was this?

When Zuko came in for work the next day, Iroh was busy setting up for the day ahead. He looked up when the little bell over the door chimed sweetly and felt his heart fill near to bursting when his nephew stepped in. How he had missed the boy.

He almost called out to him, stopping himself just short of saying it aloud. Li. Not Zuko. Li. Zuko was a death sentence in Ba Sing Se. Li was just a boy learning to serve tea in a new city. Li was safe.

“Li,” Iroh called, “welcome. Come join me and I’ll show you how to prepare the kettles.”

Zuko allowed himself to be ushered into the kitchen where three kettles were sitting benignly over open flame. The other two were still being cleaned before adding the fresh tea leaves. The Knowledge Spirit hopped gracefully from Zuko’s shoulders and began a thorough inspection of the kitchen’s nooks and crannies. Iroh had little doubt the Spirit would miss any potential hiding spot.

“I thought I would be serving tea,” Zuko said, glancing between the kettles in confusion, “not brewing it.”

“You will be,” Iroh said, patting his nephew’s shoulder and returning his attention to the empty kettles. “But since I’ve already cleaned the cups and trays, I thought it would be nice to teach you how to brew the tea.”

The grimace on Zuko’s face was painfully familiar. “I’d rather not,” he said. “No offense,” he added quickly.

Now that wouldn’t do. “Well, if we get busy and I can’t brew the tea fast enough, then I’ll need help from someone who knows how,” Iroh said, sniffing a new can of fresh, dried tea leaves. Ah, heavenly.
“I thought that was Pao’s job,” Zuko grumbled, tucking his arms into his sleeves to resist touching anything.

Iroh shrugged. “It is and Master Pao is a great help, but,” he winced, “his tea is, ah, how did you put it the other day? It was so eloquent.” He furrowed his brow and made a show of thinking hard, ignoring the faint dusting of red in his nephew’s cheeks. “Ah yes, ‘hot leaf juice.’”

The dusting became a blush and Iroh laughed merrily.

“Do not worry,” he said, placing a reassuring hand on Zuko’s arm. “I’m not offended. But I will tease you about that from now on.”

Zuko just sighed heavily and let his shoulders slump in weary acceptance of his fate. Iroh hummed and began training his new waiter.

As the day went on, Iroh began to wonder if having Zuko as a waiter was really the wisest decision. It had been so long since he and Zuko had interacted with any group of people in polite company, that he had forgotten how blunt his nephew was.

Oh dear.

He had already received a couple complaints about Zuko’s curt responses and lack of a friendly demeanor. But only a couple. The rest of the patrons seemed to take the newest addition to Pao’s Family Teahouse with wry amusement.

However, it was the Knowledge Seeker who seemed to hold the majority of the customers’ interest. Iroh watched the three-tailed fox weave expertly between feet and furniture, avoiding grabbing hands and kicking legs. It was a bit odd to see a venerated Spirit such as the kitsune reduced to a mere mouse hunter.

Thankfully, once the early morning rush had died down to a more tolerable trickle of customers, Iroh proclaimed a sore back and took his break. He didn’t miss the way the fox Spirit’s ears flipped in his direction. He looked forward to this talk.

Easing himself into the small chair behind the teahouse, Iroh sighed and breathed in the magnificent scent of jasmine tea with just a hint of honey. Closing his eyes, he pictured the flowering cherry blossom trees in the palace garden in Caldera City. Such a relaxing place. So tranquil. He missed it.

:Then it is as I thought,: a voice whispered in his head. :You are Fire, old man.: 

“I am,” he said, opening his eyes to behold the endless blue that served as the Knowledge Spirit’s gaze. “Although, perhaps I am not so old yet.”

The Knowledge Spirit sat primly on top of a crate of empty tea bags, curling her tails around her paws, and gazing steadily at Iroh. She tilted her head slightly and her jaws parted revealing glistening white teeth.

:You know Li.: 

“I do,” Iroh murmured, nodding. He took a careful sip of his tea. “He is my nephew.”

:Why do you not tell him this?: she asked, genuinely curious. :What is it that you fear?: 

“Fear?” Iroh hummed in thought. “I do not fear much,” he said honestly. “But the thought of losing
"Do not speak his name.\:" the Knowledge Spirit snapped suddenly catching Iroh off guard. \:"I will be unable to hide it from him.\:" 

Ah. \:"Your bond with him is deeper than I realized,\:" he murmured. \:"Why is a Knowledge Seeker with my nephew? Li has never been one to so readily put his trust in Spirits.\:" 

The kitsune swished one of her tails and glanced back at the teahouse where Zuko was most likely using the downtime to snag a quick drink before returning to the floor. She made a sound that was a cross between a whistle and a bark and returned her ancient gaze to Iroh. 

\:"He saved my life and returned something to me, something I value above my life, without expecting anything in return.\:" she answered simply. \:"He wishes to know and learn,\:" she dipped her head, her ears flopping forward. \:"So do I. Our goals align, thus I remain. I have given my word.\:" 

\:"I see.\:" Most interesting. \:"I wonder what Wan Shi Tong thinks of you abandoning your duties in his library,\:" Iroh said casually, taking another sip of his tea. \:"It wouldn't do to worry such a powerful Spirit.\:" 

The Knowledge Spirit’s sharp-toothed grin widened. \:"Li is working for Wan Shi Tong.\:" 

Iroh choked. 

\:"In exchange for protecting me, Li will complete several tasks given to him by Wan Shi Tong.\:" The Knowledge Spirit’s eyes gleamed. \:"It is a deal and cannot be broken save by completion or death.\:" 

A deal with a Spirit. Oh, what had his nephew done? 

\:"He does not know the seriousness of a deal with a Spirit,\:" Iroh said grimly, setting his cup of tea aside to focus his full attention on the kitsune before him. \:"To allow your master to-\:" 

\:"Watch your words, mortal.\:" the Knowledge Spirit said, calm, for the moment. \:"I have no master. Wan Shi Tong is the lord of my house, the keeper of wisdom, and protector of my kin. I stay with Li because we both wish it. We are equals. We stand together.\:" 

\:"But to make a deal with a Spirit such as Wan Shi Tong,\:" Iroh argued, meeting the Knowledge Seeker’s ancient gaze with his own old flame, \:"is dangerous. A deal with a Spirit is binding. Depending on the power of the Spirit involved, the deal could be held beyond death. And no Spirit views a deal the same way Humans do.\:" 

\:"True,\:" the kitsune said. \:"But this was told to Li and still he accepted. Your assistance would be welcome, but not required. Li is clever and imaginative. He has learned much already. Besides,\:" her gaze softened somewhat. \:"I think he would value a friend who knows who he once was.\:" 

\:"I would never abandon my nephew,\:" Iroh said firmly. \:"I will be here should he need me.\:" 

\:"Then be warned, old Fire.\:" blue turned frigid as the deepest winter at the poles. \:"Should you interfere with Wan Shi Tong’s deal, you risk the life of your nephew. Choose your words and actions carefully. I will be watching.\:" 

Blue eyes slipped shut, ending the conversation before Iroh would have preferred. He watched grimly as the Knowledge Seeker scratched herself much like the simple fox she so closely resembled. It was a deceiving view.
“Zenko!”

At Zuko’s voice, the Knowledge Spirit’s ears immediately flipped up and she bounded off the crate and into the teahouse. Iroh sat where she left him, unable to believe his ears.

Zenko.

Spirits save them. Zuko had named a Spirit. He groaned, feeling his age settle over him. A deep bond indeed.

______________________________________________________________

“Hey! Is Li in? I wanna talk to him.”

Warily, Li stepped out from behind the partition separating the kitchen from the main room of the teahouse. A small person with short brown hair somewhat more controlled than Jet, but only just, stood in front of the business counter. Her hands were planted firmly on the counter’s surface and her brown eyes immediately locked onto Li the moment he stepped into view.

“You,” she said fiercely, pointing a finger in Li’s direction.

Smellerbee. Agni, why? It was only a light hit. ...that broke Jet’s nose. But it really wasn’t that hard.

...he needed this job.

Smellerbee stalked past a sputtering Pao and jabbed her finger at Li’s chest, a dark frown shadowing her face with emotion. Brown eyes narrowed but Li stood his ground. He didn’t want to, but he was fully capable of handling the girl in a fight should one break out. Hopefully that wouldn’t happen.

If it did though, there were two city Guards sitting at one of the tables nearby watching the scene in case of trouble.

It never came.

Smellerbee’s frown abruptly flipped to a gloating smirk. “Nice going, Li,” she said. “I saw what you did to Jet’s nose.” She leaned back and gave Li a thumbs up. “Don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone break his nose before. He says you punched him.”

“Oh, well, actually I just hit him with my palm,” Li corrected, reeling from the sudden change in mood.

Smellerbee threw her head back and cackled. “Damn, I wish I’d been there to see that,” she crowed. “If you boys ever want a third person to practice with, let me know. Longshot and I have the next couple nights off and we’d love to join in.”

Li flushed. “If Jet still wants to,” he muttered.

“Still wants to, he says.” Smellerbee rolled her eyes. “Look, you broke Jet’s nose. Trust me. He’s not mad.”

That… made absolutely no sense.

“See you tonight then?” she said, making her way out of the teahouse with a backwards wave.
She didn’t wait for Li to reply.

What just happened?

“Don’t just stand there boy,” Pao said, jolting Li from his stupor. “Make sure she didn’t break anything.”

What a day, and it was only morning.
Bird of Prey

Chapter Summary

In which Li asks for a favor, gets more than he bargained for, and has a rough start to the morning.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Just a few quick things:

First, a 'cranefish' in canon is literally just a type of AtLA crane. It's pretty, but it's basically a crane or a heron.
Second, I'm basing my mental image of the phoenix in here off of the fenghuang in Chinese mythology. It has longer legs, strong wings, a peacock-like tail, and the body of a small eagle. It's often shown as the counterpart of the dragon. If you want any references to how I'm portraying it in this fic, then check out videos the 'secretary bird,' a 'harpy eagle,' and a 'bald eagle' and imagine a bird of prey that's a cross of them. The phoenix would have the plumage of and long legs similar to the secretary bird (just not quite that long), strong, powerful talons and a body similar to a harpy eagle, and the fishing tendencies of a bald eagle. The phoenix would prefer to hunt and eat fish either by snatching them from skimming the water or wading into the shallow tide pools. And before you ask why a bald eagle, check out the canonical raveneagle used in Book 3 by Combustion Man to stop a messenger hawk from telling the Fire Nation that the Avatar was alive.

Last thing, if anyone is curious, the firebending moves Li begins to use in this chapter are drawn from the shaolin kung fu style (which serves as the official basis for all firebending). But I've decided Li's new style will draw elements from the crane and eagle claw styles of kung fu. They'll focus mainly on balance and grace of the crane style combined with the speed, viciousness, and grabbing/ripping tendencies of the eagle claw style. You can find lots of videos (performances, demonstrations, competitions, instructional videos, etc) of these styles on Youtube. I have. Several hours worth. ehe...

Sorry for the rambling. Enjoy.

“I have a request,” Li said, gazing up at the ancient Spirit that took the form of a nocturnal bird of prey.

Wan Shi Tong tilted his head curiously, his obsidian eyes gleaming in the dim light of his library. “I am listening,” he said, his calm tone accentuating the clipped, educated edges of his words.

Zenko swished her tails as she sat on the railing of the bridge Li and Wan Shi Tong stood on. Her shining blue eyes studied both Human and Spirit alike with avid interest. This was what she lived
for: curiosity, learning, knowing. Li knew that, which was why he would not shy away from the intimidating presence of The Knowledge Spirit.

Li took a deep, calming breath and said, “I would like to see you fly.”

The Spirit hummed, lowering his head and leaning close so his eyes threatened to swallow Li alive. Li held himself tall and kept a tight rein on his emotions. In, hold, out.

“The Dance of the Phoenix,” Li began, maintaining eye contact with Wan Shi Tong despite the disconcerting feeling crawling up his spine. “I can’t learn something that’s been lost for who knows how long all on my own. I need help.” He swallowed. “I need your help.”

Ebony feathers rustled as they shifted and- They weren’t really black. Li couldn’t help it. He looked away from Wan Shi Tong’s eyes and stared at the feathers. Sure enough, when the light caught the light just so, there was an iridescent sheen to the feathers that Li never noticed before.

“Your feathers…” he murmured. “They’re so colorful.”

And soft.

Li stiffened, horror sweeping over him and freezing the blood in his veins. Instinct demanded he yank his hand back and apologize for the incredibly rude action of touching a Spirit’s manifestation without expressed permission. But he didn’t… want to. Swallowing against the ice in his veins, Li ran his fingers down the rest of the long feather.

They really were beautiful. Li could see glimpses of red, green, orange, and even blue. It depended on how he leaned and how the light reflected off the feather. This was childish and Li knew it. But he had never seen anything that was so deceptively simple, yet so colorful and complex before.

That he knew of anyway.

If Li could find a way to create something that was as simple yet complex as this…

“The Phoenix is a bird of prey,” Li said, deliberately pulling his hand away from the fascinating feathers and taking a careful step back. “I know what it looks like. I… I know. I can see it in my head. But,” he risked a shy glance up at Wan Shi Tong’s expressionless bird-like face, “I have never seen a bird like it in reality.”

The Knowledge Spirit shifted his wing, tucking it comfortably back against his side. Patiently, he regarded Li with a curious expression, waiting for the boy to continue.

“I remember it had legs similar to a cranefish, but not quite as long, and it had the body of a canopy eagle,” Li said, tucking his hands into his sleeves to hold back the desire to touch the glistening feathers again. That really had been an embarrassing slip of control. “But I don’t remember how those birds…” he shrugged awkwardly, “hunt or fly.”

“Are there not cranefish in Ba Sing Se?” Wan Shi Tong asked.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if there were,” Li admitted, “but I’ve never seen one in the Middle Ring. There may be some in the Upper Ring, but I’m living in the Lower Ring. Lower Ring residents aren’t allowed into the Upper Ring without special permission. I can probably sneak up there during the night, but that still leaves the problem of the canopy eagle.”

The Knowledge Spirit considered Li’s words. “And what, pray tell, do you hope to learn by watching a bird of prey?” he asked.
This would be the interesting part. Agni, help Li find the right words.

“I can’t create a new firebending style from scratch with nothing,” he said. “If I’m supposed to do this correctly, to do this well, then I need something to base the style on. The Phoenix is a bird of prey, so it would make sense if I started with drawing inspiration from a bird of prey.” He took a deep breath and said, “And what better example of a bird of prey, than the Spirit of Knowledge himself?”

It may have been a trick of the mind woven by Li’s dream, but for a moment, it looked like Wan Shi Tong was pleased. When he spoke again, there was no hint of any emotion other than mild interest in his voice. But Li counted that brief flicker of pleasure as a victory in his mind.

“I see.”

Without another word, He Who Knew Ten Thousand Things took flight. Li had seen birds and catowls fly in Ba Sing Se, wild birds fly on the road to the city, seagulls swoop over the water in the ferry crossing Full Moon Bay, and buzzard-hornets dart across the night sky in the Si Wong Desert when he first met Zenko. But had never seen anything as graceful as the Spirit of Knowledge gliding in smooth, sweeping circles through the enormous atrium of the library.

The not-black wings were open and extended so they caught the ambient light of the library. Again, Li noticed the faint flickers of iridescent color in each feather. Wan Shi Tong glided gently in perfect circles, steadily gaining height until he reached the pinnacle of the beautifully detailed dome. However, instead of continuing to climb up into towering spire at the top of the dome like Li thought he would, The Knowledge Spirit suddenly pulled his wings in, tucking them close to his body, and dropped head first straight down.

Li’s pale gold eyes couldn’t move away from the deep blackness of Wan Shi Tong’s eyes as they drew nearer and nearer. Then huge, deadly talons appeared, open and ready to snatch and rip to shreds. Li’s throat dried up and he could feel the scar covering the left side of his face pull as his left eye widened slightly. Fear spiked through his veins, clenching around his heart, squeezing his lungs, and sending tingles through his arms and legs.

He would not run. He stood his ground.

At the very last moment, the talons swerved to the side, avoiding Li’s face by hair’s breadth. It took strict hold of his nerves to not flinch when he felt the wind whistle as the wicked talons flew past his unscarred cheek. In, hold… out…

He turned around, following Wan Shi Tong’s form as it arced into a swift yet deceptively gentle curve. The tip of an iridescent wing was so close to the railing of the higher levels of the library that it almost touched the cool stone. But it never did.

Instead, Wan Shi Tong landed back on the bridge from where he’d first taken flight with barely a whisper of sound. The enormous Spirit folded his wings and tucked his devastatingly sharp talons beneath his feathers, out of sight. As if they had never been.

In, hold, out.

“Wow.”

Articulate, Li. Well done.

The Knowledge Spirit hummed. “And what have you learned from my… demonstration?” he asked.
So many possibilities. Sharp precision, graceful swoops, deadly accuracy, and balance. Everything had been in perfect balance. What better place to start than that?

Li stepped up to the bridge railing and leaned over, gauging the distance between this one and the one further below. He could make the jump, but would have a sprained ankle at the very least. If he landed correctly. If not…

Maybe.

Climbing onto the railing, Li turned so he faced the far end of the bridge and took a deep, centering breath. He allowed his arms to hang loosely at his sides. Then he drew them up in slow, smooth arcs like a bird unfurling his wings, and pulled back down so his palms pressed together in prayer.

He lifted his right leg, bending it so his foot pressed against his thigh just above his other knee and held the pose for a full three second count. Next, he bent his left leg, dropping his body into a squat while balancing on his left leg. Carefully, aware of the short drop to the bridge proper on his right and the abyss to his left, Li leaned forward and drew both of his arms out and back behind them. He curled his fingers so his fingertips were slightly extended, much like Wan Shi Tong’s talons and held the pose for a full three second count.

The idea of the new style was beginning to take shape in his mind. The Phoenix was graceful but deadly. Its colors, perfect balance, and sleek appearance hid the powerful wings and wicked talons. If Li could find a way to draw those elements into a workable kata, then he would have the beginnings of a new firebending style.

This would be yet another restless night.

When Ying woke, she was not surprised to find Li already awake and writing. The fox Spirit was dutifully by his side, observing every stroke of Li’s brush with her clear, blue, open eyes. Ying’s breath caught in her throat making a soft sound that both Li and Zenko heard.

The fox Spirit turned that immortal gaze to her and Ying had to remind herself to relax and breathe. It was one thing to know Zenko was a Spirit. It was another thing entirely to see it. Yet, Ying was not afraid. Startled and fascinated, but not afraid. If there was one being she knew she could trust with Li, it was Zenko.

Even if every instinct within her pleaded with her to take Li in her arms and drag him away from the Spirit. Ying was Human as was Li. Humans and Spirits were different by nature. Neither was capable of fully understanding the other. That had been the Avatar’s duty. Or so the legends said.

A muffled whine pulled Ying from her thoughts and drew her mind to something more precious and immediate.

“Hello dear,” she murmured, smiling tenderly as she lifted Hope from her crib. “I know, I know. Mommy’s coming. Hush now.”

Tugging down the loose neckline of her nightdress, Ying bared a breast and held Hope to it so the child could begin feeding. Careful not to disturb the hungry baby, Ying stood and strode over to the low table Li had converted into a desk. Kneeling, she placed a gentle kiss on her boy’s temple.

“Still working?” she asked, leaning against Li’s side and resting her head on his shoulder. “Did you ever sleep?”
“I did.”

Ying noticed Li didn’t specify how much sleep he got. He never did.

“Is your head still bothering you?”

Li’s hands remained steady but his forehead crinkled in a barely hidden grimace. Ying sighed and sat up, pressing the back of her hand to her boy’s forehead and cheek. Li was warm, warmer than herself and Than, but he was firebender. Ying would not have been surprised if a firebender’s blood ran hotter on average than other people’s.

She blinked.

“Li.”

He hummed in reply.

“When was the last time you bent a flame?”

Li’s hands stilled. Pale gold eyes lifted from what he had been writing on the paper and blinked in bewilderment for a moment. Ying waited patiently, having grown accustomed to Li’s idiosyncrasies. She knew Li would speak when he was rea-

“I… I don’t remember.”

Oh dear. Ying was no earthbender, but she had known a few back in her home town and had met more since coming to Ba Sing Se. She had heard rumors of what happened to benders who didn’t, or couldn’t bend. Like those captured by the Fire Nation and imprisoned in the middle of the ocean on iron barges. They wasted away.

She had never seen Li so much as wave a hand at a flame before and she had known him for a little over two weeks now. That could not be healthy. She instinctively clutched Hope closer to her breast and bit her lip, gazing at her boy in worry.

Wait. Think Ying. Li may not have bent fire in the traditional sense, but he had been able to sense the heat in the kilns, detect the weaker pots before they broke, and had been out in the sunlight. Ever since Li told her about a firebender’s craving need for the sunlight, she had done her utmost best to ensure her boy was never deprived of daylight. They may be little things, but perhaps it was those little thing that had kept Li from drifting away like the earthbenders who were unable to bend.

“You should try,” she said, careful to keep her voice from sounding like she was scolding him.

“I don’t remember how,” Li said, turning his gaze to her. “I’m trying to create a new style, but even in my dreams I’ve never made a flame.”

Ying nodded slowly, pondering Li’s words. “Your mind may not remember, but your body might,” she said. Shifting so she could hold Hope over her shoulder and burp her, Ying continued. “I can’t say I understand it all, but I do know a bender must bend. Some earthbenders I met when I was young, and a few in the potter’s complex, bend both consciously or unconsciously. Particularly the children. They can get excited and accidentally form a lump in the courtyard.”

Li grimaced, but there was a hint of a smile there. He’d been the unfortunate recipient of more than a few stubbed toes from careless earthbenders in the potter’s complex. Yet another reason why Ying and Than were relieved Li had managed to find himself a job. He simply did not know how
to handle children and high emotion very well.

Which was why Ying simply adored watching Li cuddle and coo at little Hope whenever he had the chance. There were very few young men Ying could think of who treated their siblings, adopted or blood related, as well as Li treated Hope.

“You should try to firebend, if you can,” Ying said, adjusting her position so she could rest her head on Li’s shoulder. “Nothing too showy or dramatic. I doubt anyone would question if a candle flickered in a breeze or if a cook fire burned low or if a stove fire moved around a tea kettle.”

Li said nothing, but he looked thoughtful so Ying dropped the subject for now. “What are you writing?” she asked, nodding to the scribbles of familiar and unfamiliar characters on the pieces of paper next to the scroll on the makeshift table.

“Wan Shi Tong let me read some of his scrolls about Spirits last night,” Li continued, letting his head rest on Ying’s briefly before he yawned widely. “I think I have a better idea of how to identify some of them now.” He pointed to a handful of strips of paper with writing on them. “These are the few spells I can remember clearly. These,” he gestured to a messier pile right next to the scroll, “are the ones I only remember parts of. There’s something I’m missing to make them work. I just…” he sighed, “don’t remember what it is.”

Spells. Ying hummed, and handed a freshly burped Hope to Li’s startled but happy arms. She leaned over the table and shifted through the strips of marked paper. They looked fine to her, but she wasn’t really sure what she was looking at. Blue eyes caught her attention from the other side of the table just as a gray-black snout booped her fingers. Smiling, she scratched Zenko’s soft fur.

Well, semi-soft.

“You need a bath, young lady,” Ying declared, rubbing her oily fingers on her nightclothes.

The fox Spirit look genuinely offended by the suggestion, shook herself and scratched her fluffy cheek with one of her back paws. Zenko sniffed the paw then, and her ears folded back in obvious disgust. Ying bit back her laughter as she watched the Knowledge Seeker lie down on the floor and stuff her nose under the table in humiliation.

“Don’t worry,” Ying said, reaching underneath the table to pat soft but oily and stinky ears. “Every girl deserves a good day at the bath.”

She heard a snort and chuckled.

“She’s embarrassed,” Li said, leaning back to catch Zenko’s hidden eyes.

“She shouldn’t be,” Ying scoffed. “Bathing done right is a glorious feeling.”

That got a genuine laugh from her boy. Hope made a cooing sound and batted at Li’s scarred cheek, trying to get his attention.

“Try writing your spells in soot or something,” Ying suggested, glancing at out the window as the sky began to turn a deep crimson above the dark shadow of the Wall. They would all have to leave for work soon. “You’re a firebender. Maybe a touch of fire will make the spells work.”

Li blinked and stared at her, stunned as she took Hope back and moved to wake up her lazy, lovable husband. Her boy was smart. Ying had no doubt he would figure it out.

She was just finishing dragging a sleepy Than out of bed when a series of short, sharp knocks on
their door broke through the calm mood of the early morning.

“I’ll get it,” Li said, setting down his brush and moving to tuck his writings away in a safe corner.

“No,” Than said, placing a hand on the boy’s head and holding him down, “I’ll get it. You two finish getting ready.” His serious brown eyes met Ying’s over Li’s head. “It’s probably nothing.”

The fox Spirit slipped out from under Li’s work table and stood alert in front of Ying and Hope. Zenko’s three tails hung down loosely behind her and her ears were perked up and facing forward. Had this been the garden in the potter’s complex or Li’s bed, Ying would have been expecting Zenko to jump and dig for her latest hidden toy.

Now, the fox Spirit’s stance reminded her too much of when Li first discovered he could tell when a pot in the kiln was going to break. She waited, willing her heart to beat calmly, as Than opened the door and spoke in quick, hushed tones to whoever was out there. When the door was pushed open, Ying stood, flinching back when Li was suddenly in front of her, blocking her from view.

“You’re here.”

“Cheng?” Ying called in surprise, stepping to the side so she could see around Li. “What are you doing here? We aren’t late, are we?”

Dark eyes regarded Li from his place next to Than before flashing to her then to Hope in her arms. The tension lining the guildmaster’s son’s face softened in badly hidden relief when he saw them all here.

“Good,” he said, nodding to himself, “it wasn’t yours.”

“Ours?” Than demanded, placing himself between his family and Cheng. “What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

Cheng grimaced as he focused on Than. “Something’s happened at the complex,” he said in curt, clipped tones. “I need your… nephew to come with me.”

“What?” Ying gasped, not missing the way Li’s entire body tensed and one of Zenko’s tails twitched.

“He’s been here all night,” Than said.

“Yes, I…” Cheng hesitated. “I believe you. Li isn’t in trouble. We need his help.” Cheng’s dark eyes locked on Li’s pale gold. “We need his help.”

Oh. Fire. Cheng needed fire. But why would-

“Something’s wrong with the kiln?” Li said, quickly grabbing his bag and swiping what papers he could into it. He tucked the scroll in more carefully as he approached the guildmaster’s son.

Cheng shook his head, his black braid catching on his collar. “Nothing’s wrong with the kiln,” he said. “It’s… what’s in the kiln. We…” He glanced at Ying again before turning to Than. “It would probably be best of your wife didn’t come today.”

“What? Why?” Ying demanded, marching up to join her family.

“It is not a judgement, I assure you,” Cheng said, waving his hand in a placating manner. “No one is in trouble, yet. But we are short on time.” He sighed. “If you insist on coming, then you may.
But I would prefer it if you didn’t enter the courtyard as of yet. I think you’ll understand when we get there.” He glanced at Li and added wryly, “I hope you’re good with burns, boy.”
Heat

Chapter Summary

In which Cheng is willing to trust, Li overdoes it, and invited and uninvited guests arrive.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Fair warning, this chapter contains hints of disturbing imagery. Also, I probably won't be able to update tomorrow night. I'm going to the airport Thursday morning at 5am my local time to fly to Iceland with my roommates for the week. I'll try to update while I'm there, but... wifi... If I don't update while I'm there, expect an update explosion when I get back.

Cheng didn’t trust the boy Li, but he wasn’t above admitting when he needed help. He would never have reached the level of Master Potter if he hadn’t learned how and when to ask for it. The Potter’s Guild was his family, the potter’s complex his home. If Li had the ability to help his family and his home, then Cheng would drag the boy there kicking and screaming while fighting that unnatural fox the whole way if he had to.

Thankfully, it didn’t come to that.

When he’d arrived at Journeyman Than’s small apartment, he’d been afraid of what he might see. Or what he wouldn’t see. When Ying stepped into view, clutching her baby to her breast, Cheng had breathed a heavy sigh of relief. But that still left the terrible question unanswered.

But that was for later. Right now, Cheng was running through the street with Than and Ying behind him and Li racing ahead of him with his animal companion at his side. The boy could run like a Fire Nation raveneagle could fly. Thankfully, the speed was exactly what they needed right now. It wouldn’t be long before other people noticed and spread the alarm. Cheng could already smell the acrid scent in the air.

So could Li, and the boy knew what that smell meant. Without waiting for a command, Li picked up his pace -dear Oma and Shu, the boy could move- and ran straight into the door to the potter’s complex. After a brief struggle with the door handle, long enough for Cheng to catch up to him, Li burst inside with the unnatural fox on his heels.

The open first floor of the complex was mostly empty save for a few of the guild’s strongest men. None of them knew about Li’s… ability and Cheng wasn’t about to let the boy reveal himself without someone there to explain the situation, someone the entire guild trusted. Unfortunately, as long as Cheng’s father was ill and bedridden, that duty fell to him.

This was going to be a long day.

“Oma and Shu, save us,” Cheng heard Than mutter from behind him. “Ying, stay here.”
“But I can help!” the woman argued.

“No!” Cheng snapped, whirling on the young mother. “Go upstairs with the women and stay there. This isn’t something you should see.”

Ying’s soft brown eyes were steady when they turned to Cheng. Spirits above, keep Ying back. She was still a new mother. This would probably disturb her the most. He felt a weight leave his chest when the woman finally nodded and made for the stairs leading to the second level where the women and children were hiding.

“Is that what I think it is?” Than said in a low tone as he jogged to keep up with Cheng as they hurried to the kilns in the courtyard.

Cheng nodded grimly. “I believe so. Men,” he called louder, keeping a sharp eye on Li who was staring white-faced with dawning horror at the sealed kiln. “When will the Guard be here?”

“I don’t know,” Wei, the eldest of the Master Potters, answered promptly. “Xiu Ying is still gone.”

“Damn!” Cheng approached the sealed kiln, eyeing it hatefully. “Never have I hated something so intrinsic to my own craft, before,” he murmured. “Are all the earthbenders accounted for?”

Wei nodded, glaring at the earthbent rock covering the kiln door, sealing it shut to prevent tampering. “The younger boys are keeping an eye on them. Whoever did this wanted to ensure no one got inside,” he said. “Than,” he nodded to the man behind Cheng in greeting.

“Wei,” Than nodded back, returning the greeting. “What happened?”

“We don’t know.” Wei said, returning his hard gaze to the sealed kiln. “It was like this when we arrived for work before dawn. But I think we can guarantee yesterday’s works will be ruined.”

Cheng shook his head at his old friend’s dark humor. Than, however, was not amused.

“You’re sick,” the young man growled.

“I’ve seen a lot. It’s left its mark,” the elderly man said, rubbing his scraggly gray beard. He jerked his chin to Li and the three-tailed fox at his feet. “Why’s the boy here and not with the women and children?”

Ah, here came the difficult part.

“He’s here because he may be able to help,” Cheng said. Although why the fox didn’t go with Ying was a question for another time.

“He’s an earthbender?” Wei demanded, turning fully to the boy.

Several of the other men’s gazes followed Wei, settling on Li who seemed not to notice them. The boy was staring fixedly at the kiln sealed shut by earthbent stone looking very much like he wanted to throw up. Cheng could relate. As a Ba Sing Se citizen from birth, he had never known the sight and smell of burnt human flesh until today.

Li was a war orphan taken in by his uncle’s family who fled the war beyond the Walls. Li would know that smell. Perhaps, given the scar on his face and his ability, he knew it intimately.

“No,” Cheng said. Oma and Shu, if you could hear a humble potter’s prayer, please don’t hold this against them. “Li,” he said in a sharp tone, startling the boy out of his horrified stupor. Pale gold
darted to Cheng’s brown, and the master potter frowned. “Can you remove the heat from the kiln?”

What color remained in the boy’s face vanished, accentuating the dark red and brown scar covering the left side of his face. Fire Nation gold eyes, yes even the scarred one, widened and darted between the other potters’ faces in terror.

“Remove the heat?” Wei demanded in confusion. “We’ve already put out the fire as best we can, Cheng. Until the Guard and an earthbender get here, there’s nothing else we can do but wait and pray for mercy. We’ve already tried breaking the stone over the door-.”

“Not the stone,” Cheng interrupted, staring directly at Li. “The heat. Li. Can you cool the kiln? Yes or no?”

“Cool the…”

“Cheng,” Than said, stepping between the potters and the terrified boy. “You can’t ask him to do this.”

“There is a life at stake, Than,” Cheng said. “Yes, I can.”

“You and I both know- Spirits, we all know whoever is in there is already dead,” Than argued. “We can wait for the Guard.”

“Than,” Wei said, staring at the young father in alarm. “They are of Earth. If we can stop the cremation process, then we are honor-bound to-”

“I can’t let you ask this, Cheng,” Than said, stepping back so he all but blocked Li from view. That eerie fox, however, regarded the brewing trouble warily with its sightless eyes. “Not unless you can swear on your honor that you will protect my nephew from any reprisal.”

Cheng grimaced. “I can’t do that,” he admitted honestly. “I can promise to do my best. If Li can draw out the heat before the Guard arrives, then they will hear nothing from me.” He held Than’s gaze. “You have my word as the guildmaster’s son and heir. As long as the boy does us no harm, the Guard will hear nothing from me.” He extended his hand and waited.

“Not the Dai Li either,” Than added, keeping his hands firmly by his sides.

“There is no war in Ba Sing Se,” Cheng said, the slightest hint of a wry grin on his lips. “So I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He continued to hold out his hand palm up, waiting patiently.

“...no war in Ba Sing…” Wei’s eyes bulged in shocked realization as he and the men moved away from Than and Li.

Cheng’s frown deepened. It seemed the men had finally figured it out.

“Li,” Than whispered to the boy trying very hard to hide behind him. “You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. We can leave.”

No. Please don’t. No one deserved to suffer a fiery fate in a kiln.

When a long-fingered hand appeared on Than’s shoulder, squeezing tentatively, Cheng felt his chest constrict with anxiety. Li must have said something too quietly for him to hear because Than’s gaze narrowed. But blessedly, the Journeyman nodded and took Cheng’s hand.
“I will hold you to your word, Cheng,” Than said, his tone as hard.

Thank the Spirits. “I would expect nothing less,” Cheng said in obvious relief, shaking the Journeyman’s hand firmly. “The rest of you, back up. Li, whenever you’re ready.”

“Are you insane, man!” Wei shouted in fury. “That boy is a-”

“My nephew,” Than said, cutting off the older potter’s words with the finality of an earthbent wall. “There is no war in Ba Sing Se, Wei. You would do well to remember that.”

Eyes the same shade as the kiln bricks, flashed in anger. “He is Fire Nation,” Wei growled.

“My sister fell in love,” Than said simply. “It was a mutual arrangement. Who was I to argue the match? Li is my nephew and there is nothing more important to me than my family.”

“And I have given my word as the guildmaster’s son,” Cheng added, lifting a thick eyebrow at his elder. “Would you make a liar out of me, old friend?”

When no one stepped up to challenge Cheng’s words, he turned back to Li. The boy looked ready to run at the slightest provocation, but held his ground. He muttered something under his breath and shifted so he stood slightly away from Than. The fox padded silently by his feet until they stood side by side facing the kiln.

Li took a deep breath. “I have no idea what I’m doing,” he muttered, to which the fox snorted.

Cheng watched as Li closed his eyes and focused on breathing slowly, in and out, relaxing the tense muscles in his body with each exhale. He drew his arms back and up like a bird lifting its wings before lowering them and pressing his palms together as if in prayer. Perhaps it was a prayer. Spirits knew, they needed all the help they could get.

Then Li’s feet shifted, his left foot sliding forward and his right leg bending so the boy was in a crouched, ready stance. It didn’t look like any firebending form Cheng had heard of. In his dreams, he added, glancing at the rooftops in paranoia. Li’s right hand lifted behind and above his head, fingers hooked in a claw formation, and his left hand extended out so it was parallel with his left leg.

Cheng braced himself for fire and heat and the innate fear firebending commanded in anyone who found themselves on the wrong end of it. But it never came. Li barely moved at first. He simply held his stance and breathed.

Then, slowly, Li curled the fingers of his left hand into the same claw form as his right hand. He jerked his wrist sharply out and down as if grabbing something, and drew his arm back towards his chest. As is left arm pulled closer, Li moved his body forward, the opposite direction, and reached out with his right hand, repeating the grabbing move.

There was no flame. None.

Confused, Cheng followed Li’s gaze to the kiln where the peep holes still glowed red-hot and oily, putrid smoke still billowed out of the skylight in the kiln’s roof and the conical chimney at the back. The air around the peep-holes wavered, shimmering in the cool, early morning light. It moved…

No. It was pulled. By Li. Spirits. The boy was literally pulling the heat away from the kiln. The wavering, glistening, hot air flowed towards Li’s clawed hands, was drawn away, and tossed loosely behind Li’s crouched form.
The sound of a door slamming open accompanied by Xiu Ying’s cry of “In here!” came from back in the complex.

Cheng tensed. Damn it. The Guard!

Li must have heard it to. His eyes were wide with fright when he glanced back at the buildings. But instead of halting his bending, Li pressed his lips together in a firm line and ceased his smooth, slow movements. Instead, he lashed out with both of his clawed hands, jerked his wrists in a sharp downward motion, and yanked back towards himself. There was a sharp, echoing crack of stone breaking followed almost immediately by the sound of exploding pottery, and the red-hot glow in the kiln’s peep-holes vanished, replaced by cool, pitch black.

...how? Thermal shock?!

Without a word, Li was back on his feet and stumbling backwards towards Than. The Journeyman caught his nephew by the shoulders and held him securely just as Xiu Ying ran into the open courtyard with two Guards and, Spirits above, a Dai Li right behind him.

“Master Cheng! I brought earthbenders!” the young boy yelled, waving his hands.

Cheng grumbled. He would have to have a talk with Xiu Ying about the Dai Li. The boy may be new to Ba Sing Se, but that was no excuse to involve the Dai Li unless there was no other choice.
Late

Chapter Summary

In which Jet and Iroh have a talk, Jet gets some unwelcome news, and Li isn't doing so well.

Chapter Notes

EDIT 3/6/18: I fixed the errors. Good grief. This is what I get for writing at night while jet lagged. Sorry y’all.

A/N: Ok, so. Anyone who says traveling forward in time (zones) is harder than traveling back, they're wrong. Traveling back is harder. It took me all of 1 day to acclimate to Icelandic time (UTC, aka 5 hours ahead of me). But I've been home now for 3 days and I'm still trying to acclimatize. I keep waking up at 4am local time (9am Icelandic time) and being unable to go back to sleep. This morning, I was so fed up, I just got up at 6:30am and read a book until I had to start getting ready to leave for work at 8. It's stupid.

Rambling aside, I'm updating now because I'm finally able to stay up past 9pm without getting a headache from sleepiness. Iceland is beautiful. Cold, windy, friendly, and beautiful. I have so many pictures, it's ridiculous. Not even kidding. But yeah, Iceland is beautiful and I miss it, but I'm glad to be home again.

Zuko was late which was unusual, to say the least. Ever since he’d been hired, Zuko had been punctual. This was the first time his nephew had ever deliberately been late to anything. Hopefully, it wasn’t deliberate, just an accident. Accidents happened, after all. Sometimes the body needed more sleep, sometimes the weather made travel difficult, sometimes cabbage carts toppled over in the street. There really was no way to know for sure until Zuko arrived and could explain himself.

Hopefully, Pao wouldn’t fire Zuko on the spot. This morning had been particularly busy. Supposedly, there had been some excitement in the artisan’s district. No one could say for certain what had happened, but apparently the potter’s complex had been more active than usual. One loyal patron had even sworn up and down she’d seen the Guard and a Dai Li enter the complex. Jin had never lied before as far as Iroh knew. So if her words were to be trusted, then Iroh felt worry coil in his stomach.

He wondered what poor unfortunate had caught the Dai Li’s attention. Hopefully, it wasn’t anything too serious. Perhaps they had finally managed to track down the source of that odd illness that had been spreading in the district next to the artisans’. Oh dear Agni above, please don’t let the culprit be poison.

The little bell above the door tinkled pleasantly, distracting Iroh from his darker thoughts. Pasting a large, friendly smile on his face, he turned to greet the newest guest. Oh. Well.
“You’re here early,” Iroh said, watching the young man with messy brown hair stroll into the tea shop. “I’m afraid Li isn’t in yet.”

Brown eyes narrowed in surprise. Goodness, what was the boy’s name again? Ah yes.

“Would you like to sit down, Jet?” Iroh asked, gesturing to a newly open seat at a small table. “You’re in luck. I have a pot of yerba mate, if you’re interested.”

Jet snorted and plucked the straw from his mouth. “Always. Don’t tell ‘Bee?” he said, winking playfully.

“I shall take this to my grave,” Iroh said, placing a fist over his heart dramatically. The chuckled it drew from the young man was worth it. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

As he turned to go, Iroh glanced worriedly at the front door once more. Where was Zuko?

The pot of yerba mate was right where Iroh had left it, no surprise. Honestly, the number of people who wanted the energy boost in the morning was tellingly high. Iroh sighed. So much energy, so much work. Did no one take the time to just sit and enjoy the day anymore?

“Here you are,” he said, placing a steaming hot mug of tea in front of Jet.

The young man grinned and nodded a thank you, dropping two coppers on the table in exchange and stretching. “Li’s usually in by now,” he said casually. “Wonder what’s taking him.”

Iroh didn’t miss the sharp glance Jet threw his way, but chose not to think too much about it. Instead, he looked around the shop. Most of the morning rush customers were gone and all of the tea kettles were either still brewing or keeping warm. Pao was busy taking stock of what they still had and what they would need to order for the next month.

So with a content sigh, Iroh pulled out the chair across from Jet and sat down. Just what he needed. His back definitely needed this. He’d forgotten how good it felt to just sit down and rest every now and then. Perhaps he could pour himself a cup of tea later.

“I wonder indeed,” he murmured. “My nephew is usually on time.”

Jet sipped his tea, studying Iroh’s face closely before sighing. “So you really don’t know where he is.”

It wasn’t a question, but Iroh shook his head anyway. “No, I do not,” he said. His lips quirked upwards in a sly grin as he nodded to the bandaged appendage in the middle of Jet’s face. “But I heard the tale of a certain, shall we say misadventure, that resulted in a broken nose.”

Jet grinned broadly and leaned back in his chair. “Guy’s got a mean punch,” he said. “Never seen anyone turn so red before.”

Iroh chuckled. “Li has never been particularly adept at dealing with embarrassment,” he said, smiling gaily. “He takes after his mother. But I see pieces of his father in him.” His smile faded. “That is not necessarily a bad thing.”

The question was plainly visible on Jet’s face. The boy was itching to ask, but he wasn’t sure whether he should or not.

“Where are his parents?” Jet finally asked, fingering his hot mug hesitantly. “Are they-” He waved his hand vaguely, but the word not spoken was clear as a bell.
“No,” Iroh admitted slowly. “No, they are not. His father is alive, but has no desire to see him. It is not my place to say much, but I will say Li is here because of his father.” How to put this delicately? Was that even possible? “He is… not missed.”

A shadow fell over Jet’s face and his eyes darkened, studying Iroh closely. “And his mother?” Jet pressed.

“Missing.”

Let Jet make of that what he would.

“I worry about him,” Iroh admitted. “I have been with him for the past three years. I knew his moods, what made him angry, what made him calm, when he needed my guidance, and when he needed to learn on his own.” He sighed and allowed his gaze to slip to the table. “When we parted ways on the road, Li was angry. I thought by letting him be for a day or two, he would calm his temper and seek me out. Naturally, I followed his path just far enough behind so as to not be detected. But I miscalculated. I was attacked and lost track of him.”

“Fire Nation?” Jet guessed.

Iroh grimaced in reply. After a moment, he shook his head wearily. “Seeing him here, safe and sound, warms my heart. But knowing he does not recognize me…”

There were no words.

Jet pulled the straw out of his mouth and toyed with it before dropping it into his tea. Iroh barely contained his wince. Such good tea should not be treated like that.

“Why are you telling me this?” Jet said suddenly, breaking through Iroh’s thoughts. “Why now?”

“Can I not speak of my family with friends?” Iroh asked.

“You can,” Jet answered, his eyes gleaming shrewdly. “But I get the feeling there’s more to it than that.”

Iroh huffed a laugh. “Suffice it to say, I know how your nose got, ah, rearranged,” he said. “You will be pleased to know Li has been watching for you every time someone comes in, and has been disappointed when it wasn’t you.”

Yes, that was definitely a flush in Jet’s tanned cheeks.

“Which is why,” Iroh continued, “as Li’s uncle, whether he remembers me or not, I thought it wise to warn you. Do not play with my nephew’s heart. He has never had many people he could trust in his life. Fewer still who care for him. He will act on his heart before taking the time to think through his actions. This has landed him in many troubles.” He paused thoughtfully. “It has also gotten him out of many troubles. In short,” he held Jet’s brown gaze in his own dark amber, “do not hurt my nephew Jet. Or you will not have to worry about the Dai Li vanishing you.”

To his credit, Jet did not pale or flinch away from the warning. He took it for what it was and accepted it with a slow, careful nod. Satisfied his words had not fallen on deaf ears, Iroh hummed.

“I see your tea has gone cold,” he said, reaching out to take Jet’s mostly empty mug. “Allow me to refill it before you go. You should try the jasmine tea. It is magnificent.”

Jet grinned. “I’ll take your word for it, Mushi.”
“So you’re Jet.”

Startled, Jet looked up and smirked when he saw a cute girl sitting at the table next to his. He winked.

“Maybe I am,” he teased, “and maybe I’m not.” He shrugged. “Who’s knows?”

She giggled, amused but not necessarily impressed. “I recognized you by your broken nose,” she said, tapping a finger against the side of her own nose.

Jet laughed. “Not broken so much anymore since I had ‘Bee fix it,” he said, “but it still hurts like a bitch. Li’s got an arm on him.”

“He’s got more than that, from what I hear,” the girl teased. “He blushes every time Mushi mentions you.”

Well, now that stroked Jet’s ego. “What can I say,” he gestured, fluffing his collar dramatically, “I’m irresistible.”

She snorted. “Right.”

“Can I at least have the name of the person challenging my irresistibility?” Jet said, reaching for his straw and grumbling when he realized Mushi had taken it away with his mug.

The girl tucked one of her two braids behind her ear and smiled. “Jin,” she said. “I usually come here in the mornings. I don’t remember seeing you.”

Jet shrugged. “I’m an afternoon guy myself,” he said. “I just happen to have a couple hours free this morning. An order was delayed so I have nothing to do until my boss lets me know it’s ready for pickup. Then I’m back to making deliveries.”

Jin’s smile faded. “Was it a pottery order?” she asked warily.

“Yeah, it was,” Jet said, after a moment. He turned slightly in his chair so he was almost facing Jin fully. “How’d you know that?”

The girl wilted, pursing her lips. She glanced around the quiet tea shop before leaning close. Ooh, a rumor. Jet loved rumors. So much juicy news to sort throu-

“Something happened at the potter’s complex this morning,” Jin said.

It felt like his stomach had turned to stone. He wasn’t amused anymore.

“Where’d you hear that?” he demanded, perhaps a bit more harshly than he meant to.

“I didn’t have to,” Jin said, shaking her head. “I have to walk past there every morning on my way here before heading to work.” She glanced around again quickly before continuing, lowering her voice conspiratorially. “I’m not sure what happened. But there was this smell that…” She shook her head. “It smelled like… It was bad.”

“What kind of bad?” Jet demanded. “Ostrich-horse shat on your shoe bad or someone hasn’t bathed in three weeks bad?”
Jin grimaced, wrinkling her face in disgust. “Ew, neither. It was like something was burning, I just don’t know what.”

Burning.

“All I know, is that whatever it was, it was bad enough to get a visit from the Guard and the Dai Li,” Jin said. “I couldn’t stay. I had to—”


After cleaning out the mug, Iroh checked the kettles once more. Perfect. The fresh batch of jasmine tea was almost ready to serve. He had just enough time to pluck a fresh mug from the cupboard when he felt a cool breeze flow through the kitchen from the back door of the tea shop. Pao must be back in.

“How goes the counting?” he called over his shoulder, without taking his eyes off of the kettle near his elbow. “Are we short on anything?”

When there was no immediate answer, be it words or grumbles, Iroh frowned and turned around. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw his nephew standing there, but his relief quickly faded to worry when he noticed the stiffness with which Zuko held himself. Zuko leaned back against the door, his hands tucked behind his back likely clasping the handle, and his head hung so his chin brushed his green and brown tunic. He was shaking.

“Z-Li,” Iroh called, his worry almost causing him to trip over his words. It hurt to see his nephew flinch at the name. “Li,” he tried again, setting the mug in his hands down on the counter and approaching his nephew with care. “Are you alright?”

Movement at Zuko’s feet caught Iroh’s attention and he dropped his gaze to the floor. The Knowledge Seeker was nuzzling Zuko’s ankle and batting his shoe with her paw. She took one look at Iroh with her sightless eyes before swishing her tail and darting out of the kitchen into the main area where the few customers still sat.

He barely heard his nephew whisper something under his breath, but it was too soft to hear clearly.

“Li,” Iroh called, stepping closer and pressing what he hoped would be a soothing hand on his nephew’s shoulder. “What has happened?”

From here, Iroh could plainly see the pallor in Zuko’s downcast face. Both of Zuko’s golden eyes were squeezed tightly shut as if in pain.

“They’re dead.”

The words were soft and so full of unshed tears it broke Iroh’s heart. He squeezed Zuko’s shoulder comforting. “Who is dead?” he asked gently.

It took a few tries for Zuko to find the energy to form clear words. “They were… Someone put them in there knowing they would die… Wha… “ He gulped. “They earthbent it shut so we couldn’t get in. They did it deliberately! Wha- Why would…” He breathed a quiet sob. “They were just children. Why would someone—”
Pale gold eyes flashed up to Iroh’s dark amber, roiling with anger, sadness, disgust, horror, and pain. “What kind of monster would murder their own children?” he hissed furiously. “They were alive when they were put in there. Alive!” Zuko shuddered in horror. “And we didn’t know. We couldn’t get them out. They burned alive and we couldn’t do anything!”

Iroh didn’t understand where this was coming from, but he knew pain when he saw it. He pulled his nephew close and held him until Zuko twitching away from the contact.

“What’s going on? Li?”

Zuko lifted his head to see the person who had come into the kitchen. Iroh would have to talk to Jet about that. Customers really weren’t allowed in the kitchen for health reasons. But perhaps not right now.

Now, he let his beloved nephew step away from him and stumble over to Jet. It hurt to see Zuko wrap his arms around Jet’s shoulders and cling to his friend as soft sobs shook his body. It was yet another reminder that Zuko did not remember his uncle and their adventures together. To this Zuko, Iroh was just Mushi, the kindly old tea maker. Not the uncle who had loved him and taught him and tried to be there for him during his exile.

Perhaps it was selfish, but a large part of Iroh wanted his broken nephew back. He missed him. He loved Zuko and he loved Li. But he missed the nephew who would confide in him, rant at him, and be vulnerable in front of him.

At least, even as Li, Zuko had someone he could trust. A flash of gray-black flickered in the corner of his eye before the Knowledge Seeker leaped from Jet’s shoulder to Zuko’s, pressing her nose into Zuko’s short hair.

Why did Iroh feel like he was intruding?
Chapter Summary

In which Jet hears something terrible, passes the word on, and Tengfei may have started something that hopefully won't bite him where it hurts later.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Good news: I’m getting back into the hang of writing late at night (my usual writing time). Bad news: Daylight Savings ends this Sunday and I’m not looking forward to that. I lose a precious hour of sleep. __-__ Sleep. *Golum voice* My precious~

If anyone's interested in thermal shock, I **highly** suggest you check it out. It's a phenomenon that's actually very interesting. If you want and have an hour to burn, watch this video linked below. It details how thermal shock brought down 2 Boeing 737 airplanes and almost brought down a third before the cause (thermal shock) was discovered and the problem fixed. It's very interesting. I did a project on those accidents.

**Mayday: Hidden Danger** link: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5vr8x9

When the Spirit-fox bounded onto the table he sat at in the tea shop, Jet knew Li was here. But he didn’t get the chance to process much more than that before he noticed the agitated chirping sounds and the way Zenko’s fur was unusually puffed. She snapped at his sleeve and tugged him towards the kitchen, her ears flat against her head.

“What’s she doing?” Jin asked, a curious frown on her face.

Jet knew. He didn’t wait. He stood quickly causing his chair to make an obnoxious screeching sound as the legs dragged against the rough stone floor and rushed after the Spirit-fox. He was expecting the worst. Li ragged and bleeding. The Dai Li had been at the potter complex, where Li and his family worked.

Something had been burning and Jet had a sneaking suspicion it hadn’t been trash. It wasn’t Li who’d been… burning. Was it? Oh Spirits, please no.

It hadn’t been Li. Li was whole as far as Jet could tell. But the boy was leaning into his uncle’s embrace and shaking, so he clearly wasn’t whole emotionally.

“What’s going on?” he demanded. “Li?”

He saw pale sparrowhawk eyes, bright with tears and dulled of their usual spark, flash up to him a second before Li abandoned Mushi and embraced him instead. Caught off guard, Jet instinctively wrapped his arms around Li’s shaking shoulders, staggering under the weight of his friend. The
soft sounds close to his ear and the tell-tale dampness beginning to seep through his collar left Jet further confused.

He had known Li for all of a few weeks, but during that time he had never seen Li cry. Furious, embarrassed, shy, excited, joyful, curious, afraid… But never sad. Now, he could feel the crescent shaped indents from Li’s short nails digging into his back through his shirt and see the way Li’s entire body shook as he tried to keep his sobs quiet. Damn it, Jet was not the best at handling tears.

So he just stood there and held onto Li. Whatever happened must have been bad. He lifted his gaze to old man Mushi who had an expression of sad acceptance. Jet felt a stab of awkwardness. Mushi was Li’s uncle, even though he didn’t remember. Watching Li chose to cling to someone else must not be easy. And after that description of the Spirit abyss that was Li’s family, Jet couldn’t help but wonder if Mushi had been the only one Li had ever turned to.

Until now.

“What happened?” he mouthed to Mushi, careful to keep his breath from making too much sound. He didn’t want Li to hear him. He’d wrangle the full story out of Li’s mouth later.

Mushi suddenly looked much older, started to speak, then shook his head. “I don’t really know,” he mouthed back slowly. “Ask him. I’ll go talk to-”

“Sorry!” Li said.

Instantly, Li stood ramrod straight and stumbled out of Jet’s arms nearly knocking Zenko off his shoulders. The Spirit-fox adjusted her footing, swishing her tails for balance, and pressing her face against Li’s. Li’s cheeks were still obviously blotchy and covered in tear stains from crying and his eyes were still watery. But he held his breath, refusing to cry. His good eye was wide with fear and lingering sadness.

“Give him a break, Pao,” Jet groused, not at all happy with the way Li was getting reprimanded. There were extenuating circumstances.

Pao aimed a haughty glare at Jet who did not belong in the kitchen and opened his mouth to give him a thorough tongue-lashing when he finally saw Li’s face. Jet watched as Pao’s brown eyes studied his waiter’s distraught demeanor in surprise.

“By Yu Huang’s green eyes, boy. What happened?” he demanded.

Li gulped before trying to explain. “There was, um, something happened at the pott- at, um, home and the…” He absently reached up and grabbed a handful of one of Zenko’s fluffy tails, clinging to it like his sanity depended on it. “They needed my help. I couldn’t come earlier, sorry.”

Pao frowned and narrowed his eyes, glancing at Mushi. Whatever Pao saw made him begin to grasp the situation. “I see,” he said. “What was so important you couldn’t send someone to explain your absence?”

Jet didn’t like watching this interrogation, but he really wanted to know. What could possibly be so bad it could reduce Li to this? What… Who had been burned?

Did he really want to know?

“Someone, um, broke into the potter’s complex and,” Li took a shuddering breath before
continuing, “they… They put th-their…”

Jet noticed the way Mushi’s eyes suddenly sharpened in horrible understanding. Jet didn’t want to hear this. He didn’t want to hear this. Even though he did.

Li licked his lips and dropped his gaze, obviously trying hard not to relive what he was describing. “They put their children in one of the kilns and, um, earthbent it shut.”

What?

“They were alive when… We didn’t know. We couldn’t hear them.”

What?

“All of our earthbenders are too young to…” Li said, leaning into the Spirit-fox’s soft nuzzle and wet nose pressing into his cheek. “None of them were strong enough to move the- the rock sealing the kiln shut.”

He wanted to throw up.

“We got the fire out, but we needed earthbenders to get in.” Li shook his head and shuddered. “We got the Guard and- and T- a Dai Li,” -why did Li look at him right then?- “to open it. But they were already… We couldn’t do anything they…”

“I think that’s enough,” Mushi said, resting a hand on Li’s shoulder and squeezing comfortingly. Li’s words obediently stumbled to a halt.

Jet really, really wanted to throw up. Li was lying. He had to be lying. He had to be. No Earth Kingdom parent would willingly burn their children alive. Any trueborn Earth Kingdom citizen, especially earthbenders had to be buried to put their spirits to rest. Li was lying.

But even as he thought that, Jet knew it wasn’t true. Li never lied. He couldn’t lie. Jet had seen him try. Li sucked. He couldn’t lie to save his life. But that meant…

Someone from the Earth Kingdom burned their children alive. Deliberately.

Jet was definitely going to be sick.

“Why are you here?” Pao said, aghast. “You should be with your family helping… Why are you here??”

Li’s hand clutching the Spirit-fox’s tail spasmed. “I need to work,” he said, his voice flat.

Pao was already shaking his head. “No,” he said firmly. “No, you need to turn around and go back home to yo-”

“I need to work,” Li said again.

“Listen here,” Pao said, approaching the spooked young man. “I am not a slave driver. You saw something terrible this morning. Something I wouldn’t wish on my greatest enemy. You need to—”

“I need,” Li interrupted, enunciating each word slowly, clearly, “to work. Please. I can’t go back there yet. I’ll see— I don’t want to think. Please, just- Give me something to do. Anything. I just need to work.”
Clearly Pao disagreed, but one glance at Mushi and he kept his mouth shut and sighed. “Fine,” he said. “Help Mushi with the dishes and bus the tables. I’ll be taking the orders today.”

Li nodded listlessly.

“And you, young man,” Pao said, turning his ire on Jet, advancing with a waving finger. “You are a customer, not an employee. You are not allowed in the kitchen unless you’re going to work. If you want to work, then we can discuss a contract, but until then out.”

Jet hesitated, glancing at Li. It didn’t feel right leaving Li alone when he was like this. But then, Li wouldn’t really be alone, would he?

“Hey, Fox!” he called. Li’s pale gold eyes lifted to his at the same time the Spirit-fox’s sightless eyes locked on him. “Stay with him. Don’t let him do anything stupid. You know how he is.”

Zenko tipped her head down and curled her tails around Li’s neck protectively. Li, however, wasn’t impressed with the friendly jab and shot Jet a weary glare. Well, it was probably supposed to be a glare, but it came off more like a grimace. It was so adorably Li, it took much of Jet’s self-control to keep from poking the other boy’s cheek. The only thing holding him back was the roiling in his mind and gut.

He was almost relieved when he trudged out of the kitchen and back to the table and his now cold cup of tea. He wasn’t really in the mood for an energy boost at the moment anyway. What he needed was something to soothe his messed up everything.

“Hey, Jet, are you alright?”

Damn it Jin, not now.

“You look awful. Was that Li just now? What happened?”

Actually, Jet reconsidered, maybe now was a good time.

“Hey Jin,” he said, keeping his gaze on his cold cup of tea. He wasn’t sure if he could control what Jin might see in his eyes. “I have a question.”

He could see the girl’s braided hair move in his peripheral vision as she shifted to face him. “Okay,” she said, wary but concerned.

“If I tell you what happened at the potter’s complex,” he heard her gasp and fought the vicious pride of knowing he had her absolute attention, “will you promise to keep me in the loop?”

“The loop?” she asked. She hummed and leaned back so he could no longer see her through the corner of his eye. “About the potter’s complex incident specifically? Or in general?”

“The pot-” Actually. “Both.” He forced his body to relax so he didn’t seem so intimidating. He needed her help. He couldn’t afford to scare her away. “I make deliveries for the merchants who travel back and forth between the Middle and Lower Rings,” he explained. “I can tell you anything juicy that comes my way, as long as you keep me in the loop of any interesting rumors that come your way.”

He really should flash her one of his trademark grins to seal the deal. It worked with Katara after all. Now that wasn’t a pleasant memory. And now he definitely couldn’t muster up the energy to even smirk, let alone grin.
“I can do that,” Jin said. Jet heaved a sigh of relief. “But… May I ask, why the thing at the potter complex? It was probably just someone who mentioned the- Who talked too loudly about our boys on the Wall.”

Nice save. Unfortunately-

“I wish,” Jet said grimly.

Now he did lift his head, but he didn’t sit up straight. He slumped against the back of his chair and crossed his arms. He moved his tongue to- Damn it. He still didn’t have his straw. He needed to fiddle with something. It helped soothe his nerves.

“Some bastard snuck in overnight,” he said.

“How?” Jin demanded in confused disbelief. “They’d have to be an-” Her eyes widened.

Jet nodded. “They were. I’m not a particularly Spiritual person myself, but I personally hope they burn to a crisp so they never see the halls of Yu Huang. Fuck them.” He spat into his cup of cold tea.

Jin flinched at the curse and curled her lip when he spat. “That’s a bit much,” she said. “They just broke in, after all. That’s kind of harsh for a theft.”

“It wasn’t theft they were after though,” Jet said. He didn’t turn his head, but he did look right at her. “They locked their own kids in an active kiln and earthbent it shut.”

Jin gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. Her soft brown eyes were wide with horror and her face was turning the faintest shade of green. Jet agreed with that sentiment wholeheartedly.

“The potters didn’t find out until morning,” Jet continued. “They were probably woken by the smell. Burnt flesh,” -Jin made a sound that was almost a dry heave- “has a way of permeating everything in the area. I… remember. I lost my parents, my whole family to,” he glanced at the warily at the windows, “Fire. It’s not something you forget.”

He let Jin take a few moments to compose herself. When she finally spoke, her voice was calm and even, the exact opposite of her face.

“How do you know?” she asked simply. “Not that I doubt you, I just-”

“Want to check your sources,” Jet nodded, waving a hand. “Not a problem. I get it.”

He would have trouble trusting her if she didn’t do some fact checking on some level before spreading rumors. Still, he glanced back at the kitchen. Maybe that was too obvious because he heard Jin’s breath catch.

“Oh,” she whispered. “Li told you.”

“Li’s family are potters,” Jet said simply. “He was there. Judging from his face,” he sighed, “he probably saw the remains.”

“Oh Spirits.” Jin leaned against the table, her hands clutching the edge to ground herself.


Movement by the kitchen caught his attention and he looked over hoping it was Li. It wasn’t. But Mushi wasn’t so bad. The old man’s entire plump figure drooped and his light brown eyes which
should be full of jokes and merriment were shadowed with worry and age. He moved slowly over to Jet’s table with a tray in his hands.

“Here,” he said, placing a fresh, steaming mug of tea on Jet’s table. “Peppermint tea for your stomach.” He reached for the mug of cold tea when he noticed Jin’s pale face. He frowned briefly before his expression cleared and he nodded. “I’ll be back with another.”

He took the cold tea back to the kitchen on his tray, returning less than a minute later with another mug of steaming peppermint tea. He set the tray on Jin’s table and placed the steaming mug in front of the girl’s shaking hands.

“Drink this, dear,” he said. “It will help calm the stomach.”

She nodded hesitantly. “Thank you,” she whispered, wrapping her hands around the cup and absorbing the soothing heat.

When Mushi returned to the kitchen, Jin took a deep breath and sipped her tea. She winced as the hot drink scalded her tongue, but she still swallowed. Jet was impressed despite himself. He wasn’t going to do that. He was going to wait a bit more before sipping his tea. He didn’t want a scalded tongue.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said, her eyes flicking to his briefly.

Jet nodded. They both liked Li. They both hated this news. They both wanted the word out. They both wanted to find out the truth. This could be the beginning of a beautiful, mutual relationship.

This… Tengfei had seen a lot of things during his many years as a Dai Li. He’d seen murder, theft, spirits, curses, clandestine and a few not-even-remotely-clandestine, erm, sexual encounters. But never in his life had he ever seen or even dreamed he would see what he saw this morning.

The bodies, if they could even be called that considering how little remained of them, were burnt almost to a crisp. What little they had been able to recover was brittle and had to be handled with the utmost care. No one wanted to leave any body parts behind.

His younger partner Shanyuan had had trouble holding in the contents of his stomach. The only thing that had kept him from throwing up the moment he saw the burnt remains was the presence of the Guard and the onlookers.

Tengfei had ended up joining his partner down in the potter’s courtyard when he noticed Shanyuan was slipping. He couldn’t blame his partner. It really was nightmarish. Whoever was responsible for this travesty would pay dearly. Killing children. Who would dare? Even the Dai Li did their best not to involve children if they could avoid it.

It was an unspoken rule. If they had to take a child in, mindbending was the first option, death was the last. And if death was a necessity, such as the rare time they found a firebender, then they made it quick. No one wanted the weight of torturing children on their minds.

One of the potters, a homely man who was still a bit leaner than was considered healthy, shifted. Normally, Tengfei wouldn’t have noticed something so insignificant. But the flash of gray-black darting away from the man’s feet demanded he look. It couldn’t be.

It was. Tengfei only just managed to slam his mouth shut before it hit the ground. Spirits above, it
really was. Tengfei would recognize that scar anywhere.

It seemed he wasn’t the only one who recognized a familiar face when he saw it. He knew the moment Li recognized him. The boy’s pale face positively drained making him look almost sickly. Fire Nation gold darted up and down Tengfei’s official Dai Li uniform, to the kiln, then back to Tengfei’s eyes. Li gulped and backed away, glancing at the Earth Kingdom potter he’d been hiding behind briefly before settling on someone behind Tengfei.

Curious, Tengfei shifted his weight so he could glance behind himself and still keep Li in sight. Cheng, the son of the potter’s guildmaster, nodded to the homely Earth Kingdom man who had sheltered the boy then waved Li away. With one last frightened glance at Tengfei, Li bolted for the main building. Curiously, instead of immediately leaving, Li made for the staircase underneath the overhang area filled with empty potter’s wheels.

“He helped us put the fire out,” Cheng said, drawing Tengfei attention. “I would rather someone his age not see this.”

Helped put the fire out. Indeed.

“Sir.”

Tengfei turned to his partner. Shanyuan was holding it together well so far.

“What is it?” he asked.

“How long ago did you get the fire out?” the Guard asked Cheng.

Shanyuan glanced at the Guard briefly before stepping closer to his partner. “Can we speak privately?” he asked in a low voice.

Intrigued, Tengfei lifted a lone eyebrow but nodded and moved closer to the kiln. Shanyuan clearly wasn’t pleased with Tengfei’s choice was location, but it was certainly private. Understandably, no one wanted to go near the kiln at the moment.

“What is it, Shanyuan?” he asked.

The young Dai Li stared at the burned husks that had once been living children with an openly broken expression before composing himself. He clasped his hands behind his back professionally and said calmly, “I think a waterbender helped cool the kiln.”

Interesting. “Explain,” Tengfei said.

Shanyuan took a deep breath and before turning his light brown eyes back into the kiln. He deliberately avoided looking at the remains on the ground, instead focusing his attention on the shards of broken pottery colored a disturbing red and the kiln’s stone walls.

“It’s the walls, sir,” Shanyuan said, nodding to the kiln walls. “They’re cracked. Kilns are designed to handle a tremendous amount of heat. It would take time to cool an active kiln this much as fast as Cheng claims unless a waterbender was involved.”

Curious, Tengfei followed his young partner’s gaze and, sure enough, there were cracks in the kiln’s walls. Come to think of it, the pottery was smashed as well. Every single piece. A few pots were expected to crack if there was a minuscule flaw. It was an inherent danger of the pottery trade. But for every single piece to crack? All of them? From the same batch?
The only thing Tengfei could think of that could cause something like this was a phenomenon that occurred when a very cold object was suddenly heated too quickly. Or, given who he'd seen slip away a few moments ago, a very hot object was cooled too quickly. In other words-

“Thermal shock,” he murmured, tilting his head down in acknowledgement. “Good eye.”

Brown eyes flicked to him in gratitude before returning to the kiln walls. “What I want to know is, where’s the waterbender?”

Indeed.

Oh.

Well. There was an idea.

“I think,” Tengfei said, turning his green gaze back to the complex’s main building where Li vanished to, “I may know the answer to that.”

Shanyuan followed his gaze with a faint frown. “The boy, you mean?”

Very good eyes, Tengfei thought proudly. “Indeed.”

“What was that animal that went with the boy?” Shanyuan asked, his brow furrowing in thought. “I’ve never seen one like it before. It looked like a coyote-fox, but smaller and with different coloring.”

Tengfei hummed. “Did you notice anything else about it?” he said, studying his partner’s expression closely.

Light brown eyes narrowed in concentration before growing round in shocked realization. “A Spirit?” he said, keeping his voice low so as not to draw unwanted attention.

Nodding, pleased, Tengfei spoke. “A Knowledge Seeker of Wan Shi Tong, unless I’m mistaken,” he said.

“But I thought-”

“Wan Shi Tong despises humans?” Tengfei nodded thoughtfully. “So did I. And yet…”

“And yet,” Shanyuan murmured.

Together, they watched as Li stumbled down the stairs with the Knowledge Seeker on his shoulders. It was too far to see his face clearly, not that the scar helped at all, but Tengfei doubted the boy was doing well.

This was the second time he and Li had crossed paths. Once, Tengfei considered a fluke of fate. Twice, he began to question whether the Spirits’ were involved or not. He had his answer this time. With a Knowledge Seeker attached to Li, it was a wonder that Tengfei or other Dai Li hadn’t crossed paths with Li earlier.

Wan Shi Tong had better know what he was doing sending a firebender into Ba Sing Se. Or was it waterbender now?
Toph

Chapter Summary

In which Toph slips away and starts on an epic adventure. Of sorts.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Back by both popular demand and because she demanded it, I present Toph. She literally took over this whole chapter and made this the longest chapter to date. Bless Toph and her awesome self. For a time reference, this all takes place a day or so before the episode Days of Ba Sing Se where everyone has their own oneshot event like Toph and Katara's spa day.

Not important, but fun fact: the minor OC mentioned in this chapter, Ye Xiu, is loosely based on the character of the same name from the Chinese webnovel and anime Quan Zhi Gao Shou, or The King’s Avatar. It's a fabulous show with season 2 planned to air this Spring. Go watch it, if you're interested.

Seriously, just because she was blind that didn’t mean she was completely helpless. She knew her way around Ba Sing Se. She could ‘see’ just about all of it. So many feet pounding the earth throughout the city punctuated by rings of silence which she assumed were those impressive Walls, and a particular blotch of absolutely nothing which… She thought it was a lake or something, but she wasn’t exactly sure.

That wasn’t really important though. What was important was the fact everyone else thought she was useless because she couldn’t see. She could feel Sokka constantly glancing back at her over his shoulder to be sure she was still following them as they wandered the Inner Ring. It irked her to no end.

So naturally, she decided to punt this boring stuff and do something interesting. Alone. She could have some adventures too, after all. She wasn’t helpless. She could operate on her own perfectly fine, thank you very much. All she had to do was wiggle her toes like this, twich her fingers like that, push like so-

-and out she popped in the Middle Ring. Stamping her foot, she ‘listened’ to the vibrations reverberating through the dirt and rock of the city. Good. She wasn’t too far the university. She could feel the blankness that was the canal snaking down from the culvert beneath the Upper Ring’s wall and through the Middle and Lower Rings towards the large blank spot in the Agrarian Ring. Yeah, that had to be a lake. No way could it be anything else.

Hmm, well if she was where she thought she was -and there was no way she was wrong thank you very much- then that meant she was close to where she met that boy with the kitsune. Li. Spirits were really more up Aang’s alley than hers, but she would be lying if she wasn’t a little curious. She’d never even heard of a Spirit who was blind like her.
Was the Spirit actually blind though? What did that fox Spirit use to see? Was it something Toph could utilize in her bending? She could ask.

Oooh. Now there was an idea. Yeah. She did promise to track that boy down one day, right?

Besides, this could be a good exercise for her feet. If she could really figure out how to track down one lone pair of feet in a city the size of Ba Sing Se, then she was definitely the best earthbender of all time. No doubt.

Cool. Now then, wait, listen, feel. She stamped her foot again and ‘listened’. She didn’t have much to go on since she’d only known the boy for a few minutes before the creepy Joo Dee lady dragged her back to the gang. But she remembered how he walked with the fox Spirit on his shoulders. He put more weight on the balls of his feet than most Earth Kingdom folks.

Actually, the way Li walked was different than most people Toph had come across. Granted, she had a limited pool of people to work with in regards to the Water Tribes and Air Nomads, but if their people were anything like Sokka, Katara, and Aang, then maybe… Just maybe…

Katara and yes, Sokka too, moved like dancers. They flowed when they walked. It was more pronounced with Katara, probably because she was a waterbender, but Sokka definitely did that flow thing with his weight too. Only, with him, it was more noticeable when he fought. Then his flow felt a bit closer to Katara’s flow.

Aang just… didn’t. He just didn’t. He was way too light on his feet for Toph’s taste. Twinkletoes was nuts for loving air so much. Aang was Air. Toph could feel almost every breath Aang took, his feet lifted ever so slightly when he breathed in, then relaxed back onto the ground when he breathed out. And when Aang moved, he was invisible. Toph literally couldn’t feel him unless the air around Aang’s toes disturbed the dust on the earth’s surface. It was maddening.

Toph walked flat footed for obvious reasons. From her experience, most people of Earth walked flat footed too. It probably had something to do with all that Spiritual mumbo jumbo, but whatever. Toph was an earthbender. She preferred to work with the hard and tangible. Footsteps and treads were tangible to her.

Li’s footsteps were balanced. Li walked with purpose. Calm, balanced, and practically vibrating with energy. With the fox Spirit on his shoulders, Li leaned forward just a tiny bit more than Toph thought he would otherwise. But it probably wasn’t that big of a difference. He had walked heel-toe, heel-toe, heel-toe before Toph called him out. But after that- No. After Joo Dee had appeared, he’d walked away in a quick but controlled toe-heel, toe-heel, toe-heel.

Speaking of Joo Dee -tap a toe, push the ground, breathe, wait- Toph distinctly remembered feeling Li’s heartbeat speed up when he noticed that creepy lady’s presence. Actually, the kitsune had growled first and then Li’s heart had mimicked a rabbiroo’s pace. He’d instantly rolled up to the balls of his feet, braced and balanced and scared and… ready to fight.

Li was a warrior. Why hadn’t she realized it earlier? Well, she hadn’t really been given the chance to think about it too much what with their newfangled plan to sneak into the party for the Earth King’s just-a-bear. They’d even asked Long Feng himself to let them inside and the sneaky idiot had even though he obviously knew who they were.

Ugh. That guy made her so mad! And those Dai Li! They were as slippery as mountain mud and as hard to read as sand. She hated them.

Okay. Sidetracked. At least she knew Li wasn’t in the Middle Ring. Well, she hoped he wasn’t.
She was still new to this identifying-new-people-by-their-pace thing. She knew her friends too well by now to confuse their unique gates. But she barely knew Li. She was attempting this whole thing here.

Not that she’d fail or anythi-

There! Faint, but there. She was being followed. Monkeyfeathers. Okay. Plan B.

She scrunched up her toes and sank into the ground. Using her toes and fingers, Toph guided herself through the dirt and rock underneath the streets, through the Middle Ring Wall, then popped out close to the train station in the Lower Ring. She was pretty sure she hadn’t completely shaken her watch, but she wasn’t going to let them stop her now. She was on a roll!

She hopped aboard the train just before the doors slammed shut and the cars sped away towards the outer edges of the Lower Ring. The movement threw off her seismic sense a bit, but she could still feel the city around her.

Oh. Oh wow. It was blurry due to the train’s movement, but Toph could feel the city here like she hadn’t back in the Upper and Middle Rings. Here, the city was alive! It roared and sputtered and pounded. So many people so close together all moving and bending and just being. It- Wow.

It was amazing.

She got off at the first station. She needed to actually touch the ground not the elevated train railways. When she did, she crowed loudly. More than a few faceless people around her skittered away from her on startled feet, but she didn’t care. The city was alive here. She was alive here. This was so much wow it just about blew her mind.

She dug her toes into the dirt and grinned. This was absolutely amazing, if a bit overwhelming. She shook out one of her feet to refresh herself a bit before placing it back down on the ground, grinding slightly, then stamping. There were so many footsteps that they ran together a bit. It was weird and muddled but neat.

Well, it would be neat except that she wanted to find Li. Grumbling, she crossed her arms and considered her options. There were too many people here to single out one, lone pair of feet based on a rough profile. But maybe she wouldn’t have to.

Heh, there were some advantages to being blind.

“Excuse me!” she called out to anyone in the vicinity.

She could feel people glance at her briefly before continuing to stroll past her like she didn’t exist. She was not having that. Time to turn on the helpless child. She pushed her lower lip out a bit, letting it quiver pathetically. It had fooled her parents and so many others before this. She’d make it fool these people here too. She’d get what she came for.

Just you wait, Li. Toph Bei Fong was coming for you.

“Excuse me!” she called louder, pitching her voice so that just the faintest hint of fear tinged her words. “Please, can someone help me?”

One pair of feet hesitated, shifting in her direction. A woman. Tall.

“Are you lost, little girl?” the woman asked.
Her voice was a bit rough like Toph’s, but she sounded nice. “I’m trying to find my friend,” Toph explained, tilting her head vaguely in the woman’s direction, “but I got turned around and now I’m not sure where I am or where I’m supposed to go.”

Onions. Think onions. Mom. Oh, well, there go the tears.

The woman’s feet stepped up to Toph before the weight resting on them shifted as the woman crouched. The woman huffed.

“Damn. Why didn’t I notice that?” the woman grumbled. Then louder she said, “Mind telling me what a blind girl is doing all on her own in the middle of Ba Sing Se?”

Well, technically this wasn’t the middle. Not even close. But that aside-

“I was supposed to meet someone,” Toph said, feeling the crocogater tears brim her eyes. “But he didn’t show up or I’m in the wrong place or…”

She waved her hands helplessly, feeling for any sign of emotion from the woman’s feet. The stranger’s heartbeat remained even if a bit accelerated.

“Well shit.”

Toph snorted despite herself. She felt the woman’s heartbeat flutter for a second in embarrassment.

“You didn’t hear that from me,” the woman said sternly. “I try to watch my words when I’m around kids.”

“I’m not a kid!” Toph groused in frustration that wasn’t entirely contrived. “I’ll talk the way I want to.”

The woman harrumphed. “Right,” she snarked. “And I’m a platypus-bear.” Her feet moved like Sokka’s did when he shook his head in exasperation. “Look girl, just don’t run home and tell your mom or dad that word. Language like that isn’t decent.”

“You used it,” Toph pointed out.

“Do as I say, not as I do,” the woman said, standing up. Her weight moved so it focused on one foot like she was thinking. “I live near here,” she said suddenly. “Who’re you looking for? Maybe I know ‘em.”

Score. Maybe.

“His name’s Li,” Toph said. “He’s got this rough voice and a fox Spirit that likes to sit on his shoulder.”

‘Li’ may be a common name but there couldn’t be that many people named ‘Li’ who matched Toph’s description. And yes that was definitely surprise making the strange woman’s heart jump and her feet bounce.

“A- Wha- A fox Spirit?!” the woman gasped.

Toph groaned. “Really?” she said, planting her fists on her hips. “That’s the part you paid attention to?”

The woman’s heartbeat was easing up a bit, probably from annoyance, but the sharp edge of fear still gave it a quick, fluttery feeling through her thin shoes.
“He never told me it was-”

The woman suddenly fell silent. Toph could hear the dull click of the woman’s mouth slapping shut against whatever else she was going to say. So the woman knew Li. Good. Now what else did she know? Wait. Feel. Listen.

Eventually- “I see,” the woman muttered. She hummed thoughtfully. “I suppose that does makes sense.” Toph heard the rustle of cloth as the woman’s weight shifted on the dirt. “Clever boy.” She huffed, but there was wry amusement in that voice. “If he’d told Pao that from the start, he probably wouldn’t have gotten himself kicked out. Actually...” There was something darker in the voice now, but it vanished when the woman snorted in a very unladylike and very Toph-like manner. “Not the ‘she’ he was referring to. Those boys...”

Okay. Now, Toph was getting a little bit annoyed being left out. She waved her hand close to where she assumed he woman’s face was and snapped sharply.

“Hello,” Toph drawled. “Still here. Still looking for Li. And since you do know him, maybe you could at least give me an idea of where he is? That’d be nice.”

The woman rocked back on her heels in surprise, then snorted. “Well I suppose I had nothing better to do today,” she groused.

But Toph could hear the amusement in there. However, the lingering silence after the woman stood was painful. Toph grumbled and stomped her foot both to get a new clear picture of what was around her as well as to make her feelings clear.

“I don’t need you to hold my hand,” Toph said. “Just walk. I’ll follow you.”

Good grief, Toph could feel the woman surprise through the ground. Typical.

“How?” the woman demanded. “You’re blind.”

“Correct,” Toph said, holding up a finger. “Blind, not deaf. I can hear you perfectly fine, thank you very much. And besides, I’m an earthbender.” She stomped the ground again. “I can feel you through the ground. I can follow you.”

A familiar rustle of cloth and the woman’s heartbeat eased back to something more like calm. “Oh really?” she said in blatant disbelief. “Then why did you need my help in the first place?”

Toph grimaced but shrugged. “Because there’s too many people here,” she complained. “It hard to single out one pair of feet when there are literally thousands tramping around all over the place at the same time.”

She felt the woman’s heartbeat flutter with shock. But the chuckle that followed brought a grin to Toph’s face.

“Alright, whatever,” the woman said. “Just keep up.”

Without another word, the woman’s feet turned and walked at an brisk but easy pace towards the left. Toph pumped a fist in victory before darting after the lady.

“Thanks, by the way,” she said, coming up so she walked at the woman’s side. “The name’s Toph. What’s yours?”

“Roulan,” the woman replied. “I’m a Journeyman herbalist studying under Master Ye Xiu near the
restaurant district.”

“Cool. So how’d you meet Li?” Toph asked, stretching her arms above her head. “Did he trip over his own two feet or something?”

Roulan snorted a laugh and yeah, Toph was beginning to like this lady. “Close enough,” the herbalist said. “We were both on the ferry to Ba Sing Se together when his aunt suddenly went into labor.”

Toph cackled. “How useless was he when that happened?”

The herbalist considered the question before asking. “Not much, actually,” she said with a hint of surprised pride in her voice. “Once he had something to do, he got over his panic well enough. Still wouldn’t calm down until Ying and her newborn were settled. But he helped me quite a bit. Minus the pathetic attempt of a joke about the water.” She scoffed. “I get people handle anxiety in different ways, but when an herbalist demands hot water and you joke about the water being cold when it’s actually steaming is just asking to get your nose broken.”

Toph threw her head back and cackled madly. “I think we’ll get along like a boulder in an avalanche,” she crowed.

Roulan’s heartbeat sped up minutely before calming back down. “I thought you knew Li,” she said.

Had Toph not been blind and used to relying on her other senses to detect emotion and deception, she might have completely missed the subtle undertone of suspicion in Roulan’s voice. As it was, Toph did notice. But she wasn’t going to let it get to her. She wasn’t doing anything wrong. Yet. Technically.

“I do,” she answered readily. “We met by the library at the Ba Sing Se University.”

“In the Middle Ring?”

Toph nodded. “Yup. Some of the students there were gossiping about some crazy guy who waltzed right into their oh-so-perfect library with,” she gasped overdramatically, “an animal with him. Oh the dishonor!” She clenched a fist to her chest and staggered backwards in theatrical distress. “How will they ever recover from such a horrendous insult?” She spat on the ground.

When Roulan laughed, Toph knew two things for sure. First, she’d won over the woman. Second, she really, really liked this lady. Woman after Toph’s own heart. Oh yeah.

“I like you, you little brat,” the herbalist said, no disdain in her voice.

“Thanks,” Toph chirped. “Anyway, I got curious and started feeling around for someone who was walking with an animal or like they were carrying something or whatever.”

“Using your earthbending?”

Ooh, interest. Toph puffed out her chest proudly.

“Yeah. You’re looking at the best earthbender in the world,” she declared. Roulan’s snort may have been teasing, but Toph didn’t take it badly. She knew the truth. That’s all that mattered. “So I found Li and demanded to know what kind of animal he had.” Her grin softened to something warmer. “He told she was a kitsune and let me pet her,” Toph said, rubbing her fingers together and remembering the fox Spirit’s fur. “He said she was blind like me. That she used her other
senses to see like I did."

That really had meant a lot to Toph. Li hadn’t treated Toph any differently than anyone else and he had a fox Spirit who was blind. A Spirit who was blind. How cool was that? Toph really wanted to know what kind of senses the kitsune used to ‘see.’ Maybe Toph could figure out how to use it and teach Aang. The Avatar needed every edge he could get at this point. Besides, Toph was interested!

“Kitsune,” Roulan said, sounding out the unfamiliar word. “I’ve never heard that word before. It sounds… odd.”

Toph didn’t miss the way the herbalist’s heart skipped a beat during that weird pause. “That’s cause it’s a Fire Nation word,” she said. And now the herbalist’s heart was positively racing. “Relax,” Toph said, waving away Roulan’s worry. “It’s no big deal. It basically just means fox Spirit.”

“How do you know?” Roulan asked warily.

Toph shrugged. “I may not read much, not really my thing,” Roulan snorted obnoxiously, “but I’m not stupid either. My parents used to tell me Spirit tales when I was younger. I also have a friend who’s really big into the whole Spirit thing. So I’ve heard the word before. It’s not that big of a deal.”

Roulan hummed in consideration. “I see,” she said at last. “Well I would suggest you not throw that word around too much here. Particularly today.”

Hmm? “Why today specifically?” Toph asked curiously.

“Because something happened at the potter’s complex in the artisan’s district not far from here,” Roulan said.

Judging from the way her weight shifted on her feet, the woman was looking around as if checking for unwanted watchers. Crap. Dai Li? Here?

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Toph asked, frowning as she paid careful attention to the ground and moving feet in the vicinity.

“I don’t know the details,” Roulan admitted slowly, “but I do know the Dai Li were involved. So was the Guard, but that’s not necessarily unusual with disturbances. The Guard are well trained and discrete, but they typically handle almost every disturbance around here without any Dai Li interference.”

“Let me guess,” Toph said, kicking a rock so it skittered harmless across the ground out of her path. “The Dai Li being involved is a very bad thing.”

“Very,” the herbalist said grimly. “Of course,” she added after a moment of thought, “the fact anyone saw the Dai Li in the first place makes me wonder.”

Huh? “Why?”

“Because from what I’ve heard, the Dai Li don’t make themselves known unless they want to be seen,” Roulan said. “If a disturbance is big enough, it typically only takes a sighting of Dai Li to disperse everything.”

So something was up with those creepy guys. Toph would have to keep her ears and feet at the top
of their game.

“I thought the Dai Li were the protectors of the city’s culture,” she said easily.

Roulan’s heart skipped and Toph paid very, very close attention. “You’re new to Ba Sing Se?” the woman said hesitantly.

“I’m visiting with some friends,” Toph said, nodding. “I’ve been here once before but I was really little and my parents never let me out of their sight.” Or property. Or house. Or anything really. “So I didn’t get to see much.”

“I see.”

Oh boy. Here it comes.

“Then a word from the wise,” Roulan said. “Do nothing to draw the Dai Li’s attention. Those who do usually don’t show up for work the next day. Often those near them refuse to speak of them and sometimes even act like they never existed to begin with.” Cloth rustled softly. “I’ve dealt with at least two issues along those lines. One poor man lost his daughter. No one seems to remember her, or they act like they don’t anyway.”

That’s… horrible.

Just to be on the same side, Toph stepped down a little harder on the ground to get a better sense of the area around her, forcing her senses beyond her immediate vicinity. She could smell food and hear metallic clangs of pots and pans and other kitchenwares being used. This must be the restaurant district Roulan mentioned.

Oh, now what was this? Toph stopped abruptly, startling the herbalist who paused a pace or so ahead and turned to her.

“What is it?” Roulan asked.

Toph cocked her head and listened closely to the sounds, then stomped hard on the ground. There! Faint, delicate, and light-footed. Four paws danced around a relatively small space, dodging around feet and unmoving things chasing an even tinier four-legged thing. A mouse probably.

“Does Li live around here?” she asked suddenly.

Surprise, then… Was Roulan impressed? Ooh, yay!

“No,” the woman said, but the smile in her words was very obvious. “But he does work here. How’d you know?”

Toph grinned. “My feet,” she chirped.

The herbalist snickered. “He works at a tea shop right around the corner,” she said. Her body jerked towards where they’d been headed. “You comin’?”

Heck yeah, she was coming. She couldn’t wait to feel Li’s shock when he saw her. Maybe she could pet the fox Spirit again too. Or, even better, she could convince Li’s boss to let him take the day off. Oh the mischief she could get Li up to.
Visit

Chapter Summary

In which Toph arrives, gets a warm welcome and not-so-warm news.

When Roulan opened the door and stepped into the tea house, Toph followed. It was quiet except for the pleasant rumble of friendly conversation. She could only identify five individual voices, three of those five were further into the building and slightly muffled. Probably the kitchen staff. If Li worked here, then he was probably back there.

That was all well and good, but Toph was much more interested in the light footed critter bounding out from underneath a table straight at her. Grinning giddily, Toph planted her feet and spread her arms wide in anticipation. She promptly had an armful of a fluffy, whining, and gekkering fox Spirit.

“You remembered me!” Toph cried, clutching the kitsune tightly to her chest.

She felt paws scrabble up her tunic as the fox Spirit pulled herself up to her shoulder. Toph felt so giddy she hardly knew what to do with herself. She clutched the Spirit’s furry tails until she felt all four paws on her shoulder. A warm tongue licked her cheek and made a mess of her hair but she didn’t care. She was way too happy to care.

Then the fox Spirit hopped from her shoulder, landing perfectly on all four paws on her head. She stiffened and waited for the kitsune to sit down, its tails dangling next to her cheek and brushing her shoulder. This was amazing and absolutely worth ditching the gang for the day. Definitely. One hundred percent.

“What is all this commotion?” a man bellowed, lurching into the room. He wasn’t very tall or very heavy set, but Toph could hear the authority in the man’s voice. This was probably the owner.

Still grinning ridiculously wide, Toph waved obnoxiously. “Hi there, mister owner man,” she said, skipping further into the room. She could feel the fox Spirit adjust its weight on her head with every move, perfectly balanced. “I’m here to see Li,” she said, stopping right in front of the man.

She felt the man’s heartbeat jump briefly before settling. Huh. Why would visiting Li surprise him so much?

“Why do you want to see Li?” he asked suspiciously.

“Relax, Pao,” Toph heard Roulan drawl accompanied by the scrape of wood over a stone floor. “She just wants to see her friend. She won’t keep him too busy.”

Toph snickered remorselessly. “No promises there,” she said, crossing her arms.

The kitsune on her head -on her head- yowled followed by a sharp bark. The man groaned and shifted his weight.

“Well if that fox keeps making such a racket, Li will come without me doing anything,” he said.
“Oh, good,” Toph chirped.

“No! Not good,” Pao said, startling both Toph and Roulan with the harshness in his voice. He sighed wearily. “Do you have any idea how long it took me to convince the boy to take a break?”

“You? Convince an employee to take a break from work?” Roulan scoffed. “I’ll believe that when I see it.”

“For once, Roulan,” Pao said, shifting his feet so he faced where Roulan was sitting, “now is not the time.”

Toph was missing something. She could feel it in the way Roulan’s pulse sped up minutely and how Pao suddenly felt heavy on his feet. The signs were subtle, but Toph had spent enough time reading Aang and his flighty moods on his feather feet to catch the hints.

“What happened?” she demanded, her grin slipping to a no-nonsense expression. “Where’s Li?”

Pao sighed and turned his feet back to her. “He should be sitting behind the tea shop taking his break,” he grumbled. “But he’s probably fiddling with something. The boy simply cannot sit still.”

They were talking about the same Li, right? Wait. There! Toe-heel, toe-heel, toe, toe, toe.

“Actually,” Toph said, pointing towards her right somewhere behind Pao, “Li’s right there.”

“Wha- Li!” Pao spun around and marched right up to the boy, sending Li briefly higher onto the balls of his feet. Fight or flight. “What by Yu Huang’s jade throne are you doing out here? You’re supposed to be on break.”

“I heard Zenko,” Toph heard Li say, his feet easing down to a flat footed stance. It was still balanced and evenly spaced but calmer and… well not relaxed, but definitely not as tense. Then his heartbeat jumped and he popped back to the balls of his feet. “Toph?!”

“Hey there, Short Fuse!” she chirped in greeting.

And down Li went to a flat footed stance. He even scuffed a foot in frustration. “I’m not that short,” he grumbled. Yep, definitely Li.

“Still working on the nickname thing,” Toph said, waving Li’s words aside. She planted her fists on her hips and smirked. “A certain fox Spirit told me you were on break. That true?”

Li’s feet lifted briefly so the heels were barely touching the ground in surprise. “She spoke to you?” he gasped.

And huh, that was real surprise. Well what do you know? Could the fox Spirit talk? Well, it was a Spirit, so why not?

“Not in so many words,” Toph said, easily brushing aside Li’s surprise. She stored the reaction away to think about later. “Pao actually told me,” she admitted. “But you are on break, right?”

“Y-yeah, I am,” he said, settling back onto his flat feet.

His heels pressed heavily to the ground as if he weighed twice his own weight. His heartbeat slowed and his voice dropped a bit, losing some of its energy. Okay, woah. Something was not right about this.

“If you won’t take your break back there,” Pao said with a sigh, moving to stand next to Li, “then
take it out here.”

That brought some energy back into Li’s bouncing feet. “I can work!” he insisted, as if continuing an old argument.

“I know you can, Li,” Pao said. Toph heard a muffled thump and felt Li suddenly go flat footed again. Pao must have put a hand on his shoulder or something. “But you have had a very bad morning and as your boss,” he added in a slightly louder voice that drowned out the beginnings of an argument from Li, “I am ordering you to take a break. You’re my only waiter. I will not have you working yourself into a stupor and be unable to work later.”

She felt the fox Spirit still sitting on her head shift before leaping out into the air. Li’s feet suddenly weighed more so he must have caught the kitsune. His weight shifted up to the balls of his feet as he leaned forward, probably adapting to the Spirit taking up residence on his shoulders again.

“I’m not tired,” Li grumbled.

Pao hummed mockingly, then his weight shifted so he leaned more on his left foot. “Mushi!” he called to the other person in the kitchen.

“What?!” Li cried, rocking back on his heels.

“I’m going back to finish up the counting,” Pao continued. “Take care of any customers for the time being. If it gets too busy, call me, not Li. If Li tries to work, give him some of your calming tea.”

Li was positively shaking with energy now and, oh, his feet were actually warming up. That was new. Was he blushing or angry? Probably angry. But his feet being hot? That was definitely interesting.

Then Pao was gone leaving Li with Toph and Roulan. This should be interesting.

Li felt like curling up and just crying. He could not sit still. Not right now. He felt too much. He needed to not think! He needed a distraction.

“So you comin’ over here or will I have to drag you?”

Startled out of his dark thoughts, Li turned back to Toph. Oh. Right. He forgot. He flushed, reaching up and running his fingers through Zenko’s fluffy tails. He watched Toph pull a chair out from the table where Roulan was sitting and tap the tabletop expectantly.

“Um-” he said hesitantly.

“Too slow!” she chirped, tapping the ground with her toes.

“Wha- Son of a batchfire?!”

He flailed, clutching Zenko’s fur tightly when the ground stopped rolling beneath his feet. He staggered, catching his balance before the ground dipped then punched his feet depositing him into the chair at the table adjacent to Toph’s and Roulan’s. His butt thudded on the chair and he sat there blinking in dumbstruck shock.
Toph was beside herself, cackling like a madwoman and Roulan looked like she couldn’t decide whether she should be horrified or impressed. She was definitely shocked.

“Where in the world did you learn that kind of language, Li?” the herbalist demanded.

Oh. Oops. Li gulped. “I… was a sailor?” he said hesitantly, unsure.

Suddenly, Toph stopped laughing and stared at him with her cloudy eyes in a bland expression. She frowned, her eyebrows dropping low over her eyes as if studying him. But she couldn’t see him. Then again, Zenko couldn’t see him either unless she opened her eyes. Not like Humans could see anyway.

“You’re lying,” Toph declared suddenly, almost surprised by her own words.

Roulan blew her breath out between pursed lips and shook her head. “With curse words like that, I wouldn’t be surprised if you were a sailor,” she said, glancing cautiously at Toph. “Come on over here.”

When she waved him over, Li scooted his chair over before Toph could earthbend him over and scare the 

strange 

ostrich-horse shit 

out of him. A warning would have been nice and he said so. Toph just scoffed and smacked his arm with her fist. OW! Why?!

“That would be boring,” she said simply, turning in her seat to face the group even though she couldn’t see them. Li noticed how she kept her toes on the stone floor.

“So Li,” Roulan said before Li could speak up. “When were you going to tell me your fox is a Spirit?”

Li tensed feeling Zenko’s ears flip up in surprised interest. “I… wasn’t going to?” he tried.

“Why not?” she said before leaning back in her chair to stare at the kitchen. “Hey Mushi!” she hollered. “You still have any more of that oolong tea?”

He heard Mushi’s chuckles from the kitchen and Li shrank into his chair. He felt Zenko brush his neck with her tails before draping herself comfortably on his shoulders. It was comforting when she did that. He could feel her heartbeat against his back and her breathing by his ear. She was warm and alive and there.

“Coming right out,” the elderly tea maker called.

Toph jerked, her wide, sightless eyes whipping to the kitchen. “Uncle?” she called.

A sharp, unexpected crash startled Li almost out of his chair. Mushi never broke anything. He was always methodical and overly careful. It was Li who’d broken dishes. Only two. But Pao had given him an earful about it. For Mushi to drop a cup like that-

Sure enough, when the old tea maker appeared at the kitchen door, his light brown eyes were wide with shock. They skipped over Roulan’s face, lingered briefly on Li’s, then locked on Toph.

“Oh dear,” Mushi muttered.

“Uncle!” Toph cried again, hopping from her seat and running right up to the old man and attempting to wrap her arms around his wide girth. “I didn’t think I’d see you here.”

Li felt something inside perk up with interest. There was something in the way Toph said that that
set Li’s nerves on edge. He was missing something.

But before he could think further on it, the moment passed and Mushi was smiling and hugging Toph back. “Indeed,” the old man said with a merry laugh. “It has been a while. A couple weeks, yes? How are you doing?”

“Bored,” Toph moaned, practically dragging the tea maker over to their table. “I came to see Li. I didn’t know you worked here too.”

There it was again, that odd tinge to the little girl’s words. He could feel Zenko’s ears twitching, the fur brushing his cheek. Then the smell hit his nose and he sniffled, sending a dry glance the fox Spirit’s way. She really did need a bath.

Her ears drooped and Zenko dropped her head limply onto Li’s shoulder in humiliation. The display brought a weary smile to Li’s lips and he reached up to scratch her furry head. He didn’t mean any offense, honest. He wouldn’t mind giving her a good scrubbing. Ying was right. It felt great to feel clean and fresh. Zenko sneezed and Li snickered.

When he lifted his gaze back to the others, he found himself at the center of everyone’s attention. Surprised, he flinched back, quickly reviewing everything he’d said and did. What had been so odd? Why were they staring at him? What did he do?

This was annoying. Leave him alone!

Flinching away from the intrusive thought, Li dropped his gaze to the table. “I didn’t know you knew Mushi, Toph,” he said, hoping to change the focus of attention back to the girl who clearly enjoyed the limelight.

“Indeed,” Mushi said, smiling broadly. “We met on the road to Ba Sing Se.”

“Small world,” Roulan said, deliberately nudging Li with her elbow.

Why was everyone hitting him today?

“I admit, I’m a bit surprised you know Toph as well, Li,” the tea maker continued easily. “How did you two meet?”

“The library outside the university in the Middle Ring,” Toph answered promptly. “He let me pet his fox Spirit.”

“Zenko,” Li said, startling Toph silent. “Her’s name’s Zenko.”

Toph’s smile returned. “Zenko,” she said, sounding out the name. “Nice to meet you, Zenko. I’m Toph, the best earthbender in the world.”

From her spot on Li’s shoulders, Zenko yawned loudly and wagged her tails, revealing her foxy grin, her teeth shining in the dim light of the tea shop. Li smiled.

“She really likes you,” he said wonderingly. “Is that why you came? To see her again?”

Toph shrugged and slapped her hands on the table. “Yeah.”

Oh.

“But I also came to see you again, Short Fuse,” she said.
Li bristled and she snickered, smirking at him. Roulan rolled her eyes and dropped a copper on the table.

“An oolong tea, please Mushi,” she said. “You two,” she nodded to Toph and Li, “are on your own.”

Toph grinned and slapped a copper on the table too. “Surprise me,” she said.

Mushi chuckled and turned his gaze to Li expectantly. Li shrugged and offered his fellow employee a grimace. The old man’s smile slipped, softening to something gentle and sympathetic and familial. Standing, Mushi gathered up the coins and rested a hand on Li’s head in a comforting manner before strolling back into the kitchen to prepare the teas.

“Alright, Li, spill,” Toph said, drawing Li’s golden gaze to her. “Something happened that’s got you on edge. What’s up?”

Roulan kept her eyes on the boy, studying him closely. That fox Spirit on his shoulders tilted its head so its closed eyes stared right at her. It was disconcerting. Now that she knew the thing was a Spirit, she wasn’t surprised by the action. But it still disturbed her.

Then Li was talking and she forced her gaze to move from the fox Spirit to Li’s face. The boy looked downtrodden. It was almost pathetic.

“I… I’d rather not talk about it,” Li whispered.

“Nice try,” Toph said. She swung her leg and Li yelped, jerking his body so his knee thudded against the underside of the table.

“What was that for?” he cried, rubbing his abused leg.

“Because I want an answer,” Toph said. “A real answer.”

Roulan narrowed her eyes, seeing the signs she was looking for. “How long has your headache been this bad?” she said suddenly.

Wide, pale gold eyes looked at her in surprise. Then Li wilted, leaning forward so his elbows leaned on the table and his fingers massaged his temples.

“Since this morning,” he admitted softly. “It's been bad since the- since then.”

“Since what?” Roulan pressed. “If something triggered it, then I need to know what it was.”

Li sank lower in his chair. The fox Spirit made a soft warbling sound and nuzzled Li’s chin, flicking its tongue over the boy’s nose.

“There was….” The boy took a deep breath, held it, then breathed it out through his nose and tried again. “Have you heard anything about the potter’s complex?” he asked.

“Yes,” the herbalist answered. What did that have to do with- Her sharp brown gaze narrowed. “You were there.”

Li nodded. “Someone murdered their children,” he said. “They burned them alive.”
Roulan swallowed over a very dry throat. “You saw the bodies,” she said quietly.

He didn’t nod, but he didn’t have to. It was painfully obvious. “I live there,” he said. “The kiln was active.”


“We never knew…” Li was shaking. “We tried to free them but…”

“It was too late.” Roulan winced. No wonder Li was in such a dismal mood. “Why are you at work? Why aren’t you with Ying?”

Li was already shaking his head. “I-I can’t,” he said. Roulan chose to ignore the way the boy’s voice broke and let him continue. “I’ll just see them again and I can’t- I just can’t. They’ll never leave there now.”


“The kids,” Li said, forcing the palms of his hands into his eyes. “They’ll never leave there now.”

“Their remains are still there?” the herbalist gasped, sitting up straighter.

Li shook his head. “No. The Dai Li took them away,” he said. “It’s the children.” His voice dropped to almost a whisper. “The children will never leave. They can’t. I don’t want to see them. I’ll just…”

He cut himself off and forced himself to sit up. When she could see his face again, Roulan wasn’t surprised to see no tears, but she wasn’t sure if that was a good thing. She watched closely as Li put his hands palm down on the table and sat there, gathering himself.

“I can’t see them yet,” he said, his voice stronger. “I need to… I need to do something, anything. I just want to forget for awhile.” He snorted derisively. “Forget.” He laughed and Roulan did not like that sound. It wasn’t a happy laughter. “I keep wanting to remember and now I just want to forget. Ugh, fuck me sideways, I hate this.”

Roulan looked at the fox Spirit by Li’s face and felt her own dislike of the boy’s twisted laughter reflected on the Spirit’s face. Perhaps she shouldn’t press the issue yet. Later.

“A distraction, you say,” Toph said, speaking up suddenly.

Goodness, Roulan practically forgot the girl was even here. How that happened with a personality as strong as Toph’s, the herbalist would never know.

“I think I’ve got an idea,” the girl said, a slow, sneaky grin worming its way onto her face.

Now this grin, Roulan could get behind.

“You any good at Mah Jong?” Toph asked innocently.

Roulan really like that grin.
Pickup

Chapter Summary

In which Jet gets a new list of items to pick up, watches the end of a game, and picks up a little something, or someone extra along the way.

Chapter Notes

A/N: What can I say? Toph and Jet are good at what they do. Li never stood a chance in hell.

Jin hadn’t been wrong. The order Quon put in from the potters for a new table setting had been canceled. When the situation had been explained, the Upper Ring merchant had understood. For an aristocrat, Quon had his priorities straight. It was actually a little surprising.

Jet hadn’t been expecting an aristocrat living in the Upper Ring to be such an approachable person. The man practically oozed wealth but his personality was relatively jovial and easygoing. He had a few bad habits like steamrolling over other people’s conversations in typical aristocratic arrogance, but he paid well.

The man had practically started a delivery service for the citizens of the Middle and Upper Rings single-handedly. By using his delivery service, aristocrats could have their favorite cuisines from the restaurant district in the Lower Ring without ever having to go there in person. He had recently expanded to other creature comforts like art, pottery, and antiquities from the artisans and sea port districts. Trade from the other Nations was all the rage apparently. Jet didn’t like it entirely, but money was money. It paid for a roof, put food on the table, and ensured he, Smellerbee, and Longshot had a place to come back to every night and sleep in relative safety.

The last he saw of his two friends, they had been all but forced to take a job at the Ba Sing Se zoo in the Lower Ring. The owner, Kenji, had been desperate to find employees since all of the others abandoned their posts for various reasons. Longshot had come home tired and with hurt in his eyes. Smellerbee had been very vocal about the mistreatment of the animals. Kenji had done his best to care for the animals but he was just one man. Even with two helpers, he couldn’t be expected to care for an entire zoo without outside help.

The man had repeatedly put in pleas for help, offering money from his own purse to entice any potential employee. But only Smellerbee and Longshot had stayed with the job for longer than two days. Seeing his friends so wound up bothered Jet. He was happy they had found a place they cared about, but he hated not being able to help them.

He’d already mentioned the zoo’s situation to Quon, and the merchant had shown casual interest in helping. But he hadn’t made any definitive decision yet. It irked Jet to no end that it was taking Quon so long to do anything. But then again, Quon wasn’t an expert in animals or the care of animals. For such a great businessman, Quon could barely keep a cactus alive.
How did someone even manage to kill a cactus in the first place? Jet had no idea, but Quon succeeded. Jet had seen the sad plant just the other day. It was kind of impressive in a creepy sort of way.

Speaking of death, there went what was left of Jet’s good mood. Not that he’d been in a particularly good mood to begin with, but it was the principle of the thing. His thoughts kept drifting back to Li and his awful sobs dampening Jet’s collar. Jet had never imagined he’d ever see Li so… broken.

Whoever was responsible for killing their kids, especially like *that*, Jet would *end* them. Although, since the Dai Li were involved, he probably wouldn’t have the chance to do that. Unless he was super sneaky and quick about it. People died all the time. It would be a terrible shame if the ladder rung broke while an unfortunate was standing on it. Such a shame. Accidents happened. So sad.

Jet felt a smirk tugging at his cheeks but he didn’t mind. This was familiar. The warm pleasure of strategizing and planning the imminent demise of an enemy. The enemy may not be the Fire Nation this time, but they might as well be. Who in their right mind hurt a child? *Murdered* a child? *Children.* Multiple.

Sick.

“Jet!”

Startled out of his darker thoughts, Jet straightened and looked over to Quon. He ran his tongue over the straw in his mouth and tucked his hands in his pockets as the merchant approached him. The man was grinning and Jet could feel his purse get heavier in anticipation of his next assignment.

“Yes sir,” he replied when the man was close enough.

Quon’s thin, brown eyebrows curved upwards, pleased with Jet’s show of respect. Jet may not like the man completely, but he could respect Quon’s honestly and ruthlessness in business. Whatever he promised to pay, he payed without trying to wiggle out of it. That was the main reason why Jet stayed with him without regret. The fact he got to see a lot of Ba Sing Se that he wouldn’t be able to otherwise was just a bonus. He’d already been eyeing a few eateries in the Upper and Middle Rings as potential places to take Li to one day. Maybe.

“I have a pickup request,” Quon said, handing a small scroll to Jet before tucking his hands back into his emerald hemmed cream sleeves.

“Where from?” Jet asked, untying the ribbon and unrolling the scroll to read the list of items to get and the pickup location. He made it to the name of the place at the top of the scroll before his eyebrows flew up almost to his hairline in surprise. “Pao’s Family Tea House?” he said, looking up at Quon. “Really?”

When Quon smiled, it stretched across his square jaw just above his neatly trimmed brown beard. He chuckled in amusement. “You know the place, I see,” he said warmly. “Good. I’ve heard the place has gained a bit of a reputation for good tea. What do you think?”

Jet huffed a laugh, rolling up the scroll and tucking it into his belt. “It’s great,” he said without reservation. “Mushi’s the guy who makes the best tea. Pao’s good but Mushi’s the best. I don’t think I’ve ever had Li’s tea.”

Now there was a thought. He’d have to finagle Li into brewing him some tea for the heck of it. Hopefully, it would take some, ahem, convincing. Jet was good at convincing.
Quon’s smile broadened and his forehead crinkled in interest. His head was shaved to the middle of his head where thick, dark brown hair grew, tied back in a neat braid that dangled down his back. He chuckled and rubbed his bristly beard thoughtfully.

“I didn’t realize,” he said curiously. “You know the place well, then.”

Jet nodded and shrugged. “I go every day if I can help it,” he said proudly. “The tea’s great, the waiter’s hot, and the mascot is a crowd favorite.” He gestured in mock helplessness. “What can I say?”

Now Quon laughed heartily. “Well, I’ve never heard of a tea shop with a mascot,” he said. “What is it?” He held up a hand. “It’s not a viper-lizard or anything like that, is it?”

Jet scoffed. “No way. I think Pao’d have a heart attack if he even thought a viper-lizard was anywhere near his shop. Naw, the mascot’s a fox.”

The merchant’s brown eyes sparkled with curiosity. “A coyote-fox? Odd creature to have in-”


Quon’s expressive eyebrows drooped low over his brown eyes in confusion. “A wolf-fox?” he asked.

“Just a fox,” Jet said, shaking his head. “Trust me. I went through the whole spiel with Li. Guy got all huffy about it, too. Don’t blame him now, actually,” he added, scratching his head.

Li’s cheeks always got blotchy when he got frustrated. But the guy was right. It really was hard explaining Zenko without outright saying she was a Spirit. No wonder he started just telling people she was ‘just a fox’ even though it was painfully obvious she was so much more.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard of such a creature,” Quon said, crossing his arms thoughtfully. “Do you think I could see this… fox?”

Jet shrugged. “If you go to the tea shop, yes sir,” he said. “Otherwise, you’ll find her with Li. Li’s the waiter,” he clarified. “He’s her person. She’s always with him, follows him everywhere. She’s got quite the personality.” Literally.

The merchant hummed, considering his deliver boy’s words. After a moment, he shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind meeting this Li and his furry friend,” he said. “Anyway, I’ll need the items on that list before the evening meal tonight,” he said next, all business. “The customer is planning on hosting a tea ceremony. Some old custom she read about,” he said, waving a hand dismissively. “She plans to present it for her guests during her semester evaluation session at the university.”

Huh. Jet had never heard of a tea ceremony before, but whatever. He would bet his last straw Mushi did. In fact, Jet would even toss in his swords that Mushi not only knew about the tea ceremony, the old tea maker knew the actual ceremony itself too. Jet shook his head in wry amusement. Mushi’s love for tea really knew no bounds.

“So I’m dropping everything off at the university then?” he asked for confirmation.

“Yes. The Anthropology Department,” Quon replied. “Do you know where the university library is?” Jet nodded, listening closely. “The Anthropology Department is the smaller building behind it and to the left. The largest building behind the library is the Fine Arts Department building. Go in there at your own risk,” he said, leaning close conspiratorially. “I hear the haiku instructor is a witch in makeup.”
Jet cackled madly. He had to grab his straw before it fell out of his mouth from laughing too hard. “I believe it,” he crowed. “Anything else I should know?”

Quon thought for a moment. “I’d like to meet this fox,” he said. “If you can manage that, I’ll throw in a bonus. But don’t worry if you can’t. I’ll probably pay a visit to this famous tea shop myself soon. I’ve been hearing so much about it, I can hardly afford not to.”

Jet grinned. “You’ll love it, trust me. Just make sure Mushi’s there. If he’s off, then Pao makes the tea and he’s nowhere near as good as old man Mushi.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Quon said, grinning merrily.

“I’ll be off then,” he said, tossing a casual salute at his boss before hurrying off to the train station.

This shouldn’t take as long as most of his delivery and retrieval trips. He didn’t have to spend precious time figuring out where the pickup and delivery locations were so he could get the job done faster. If he could get Li out of the tea house and out into the city, then maybe that would help his friend’s mood and earn him a bonus.

When Jet arrived at the tea shop, he wasn’t sure what to expect. But walking in on a very intense game of Mah Jong between Roulan, Li, a little girl Jet didn’t recognize, and was that Zenko playing as the fourth player?! That… had not been anywhere on his list of expectations.

He stood in the doorway staring at the tableau in bewilderment before stepping fully inside and approaching the table. Movement caught his eye and he looked up at the kitchen to see Mushi holding a finger up to his lips in the universal sign for quiet. Jet nodded and dropped his gaze back to the table.

Roulan wore a frown of concentration on her sharp features. She brushed her loose braid over her shoulder when it slipped into her vision. The little girl looked positively bland, her milky gaze staring at nothing while her hands danced over the Mah Jong tiles. Milky gaze. Was she blind?!

Impressed, Jet shook his head and looked over at Li and had to bite back a snicker. Li looked awful, but not in the terrible way he had this morning. That had been heart wrenching. This was amusing. Li must not be doing too well. With the way Li wore his every thought plainly on his face, it really was no surprise he wasn’t doing so well.

Then again, Jet glanced at the blind girl, she couldn’t see his face. So hopefully, Li was relatively safe from her. Roulan, though, would probably be a challenge. Jet could easily see the older herbalist doing well at this game. She seemed more like a Pai Sho player though. Mushi was definitely a Pai Sho player. Most old people were.

Finally, Jet looked at the wily fox Spirit who was sitting on the table pretty as you please with her tails draped elegantly over the table’s edge and swaying slightly. She must have noticed him looking, because red tufted gray-black ears flipped up and she focused her sightless eyes on him. Pearly white fangs sparkled in the dim light of the tea shop when she grinned and made a soft chirping sound at him.

“Call,” the blind girl said suddenly, slapping a hand forcefully on the table.

Li practically jumped out of his seat in surprise, but immediately straightened and studied his opponents’ expressions. He hadn’t noticed Jet yet but that suited Jet just fine. He could wait for the opportune moment. Something just told him this would be worth every second he delayed picking
up the items on his list.

In unison, the three humans flipped their line of Mah Jong tiles down flat onto the table for all to see. Surprisingly, Li hadn’t done that bad at all. Roulan slapped a hand on the table with a frustrated cry and slumped back in her chair.

“Damn boy,” she snapped, wry amusement written on her face. “I thought for sure I had you this time.”

Li smirked and Jet liked. Who knew Li could look so… sneaky. That was hot! The tea shop waiter’s cheeks blossomed with a proud blush highlighting his sneaky smirk.

“You have a tell,” he said, tapping his tiles thoughtfully. “It took a few games to be sure.”

Roulan scoffed. “I do not have a tell,” she countered in offense.

“You do actually,” the little blind girl spoke up suddenly. “You tap your foot quicker when you think you have a good hand.”

Li tilted his head. “I didn’t notice that,” he muttered.

“What’d you notice?” the girl asked, turning her head vaguely in Li’s direction.

“Her eyes get a little wider when she draws a tile she can use,” Li answered easily.

The herbalist groaned and raised her hands in a sloppy gesture of surrender. “You two are awful,” she grumbled. “Alright, how badly did I lose?”

“Well. I beat you,” Li said, pointing to himself, “and Toph beat me, so you owe me three coppers and we both owe Toph…” he trailed off in a unintelligible mumble.

“I’m sorry,” the blind girl said sweetly, a dark smirk worming its way onto her childish face. “I didn’t catch that, Li. Can you speak up?” She held a hand to her ear and leaned over dramatically waiting for Li to repeat himself.

Li nudged one of his tiles around and mumbled something which became a sharp yelp when he suddenly jumped in his seat. His stared at Toph with an outright offended look and rubbed his shin.

“Everything!” he said loudly. “I owe you everything!” He slumped in his seat and continued rubbing his shin. “Ow. Why do you feel the need to kick me?”

“I’m fine,” Li said, holding up a hand.

The girl smiled sweetly as she drew the pile of coins towards her side of the table. “Then kicking it is,” she said, licking her lips as she fingered the coins.

Suddenly, Roulan started laughing. Both Li and the girl looked at the herbalist in surprised confusion.

“You’d better think again, Toph,” Roulan said loudly, slapping her thigh and cackling. “You may not be able to keep any of that.”

“What?” the girl, Toph, demanded in shock.
The herbalist pointed to the line of Mah Jong tiles lying face-up in a neat row in front of a very fluffy, very wily fox Spirit. Zenko was grinning her toothy grin and wagging all of her tails happily. Li choked and slapped a hand over his mouth to smother what sounded like a snort. Then he was laughing too and Jet really liked that sound.

He’d liked it since he first heard it while chasing the waiter through the rain in the Middle Ring. He’d liked it then and he liked it now. This was the sound Li should be making: hearty, jovial laughter. Not the quiet, broken sobs he’d tried so hard to smother into Jet’s shirt this morning.

“No,” Toph murmured, drawing Jet’s attention.

The girl’s milky eyes were wide in awe. Then, to his intense amusement, the girl stood up on her chair, pushed her tiles aside, and crawl up onto the table and slapped her hands on the fox Spirit’s Mah Jong tiles. Her face twisted in disbelief as she felt the designs etched into the tiles to the sound of Zenko’s boisterous foxy laughter.

“No freaking way!” Toph cried. “How- I lost to a fox!”

Now Jet was laughing. He couldn’t help himself. It was just so unexpected and hysterical. He tried to hold it in. But Toph’s exclamation made him lose it. He spat out his straw and had to bend over and clutch his stomach in laughter. He leaned against Li’s chair, gripping his friend’s shoulder for balance while they both laughed.

“Jet?” Li gasped, turning to see who was touching him.

Jet grinned and promptly found himself with an armful of cute tea house waiter. But unlike this morning when he hadn’t known how to handle the situation, this time he knew exactly what to do. He wrapped his arms around Li’s thin body -it wasn’t nearly as thin as it had been when they’d first met- and waited until Li leaned back to smile blindingly at him. Then he pecked Li’s lips.

Anything Li had been about to say suddenly choked off in a strangled sound that was too adorable for words. Li’s cheeks burned bright red and both of his golden, baby sparrowhawk eyes bugged in shock.

“Please don’t break my nose this time,” Jet said into Li’s speechless relative silence. “It was very hot but it did hurt and ‘Bee wasn’t gentle when she realigned it.” He grinned. “Besides, I came all the way here to pick up a few things for delivery and I would love it if you and that lovely lady over there,” he nodded to the fox Spirit who was loudly gloating her victory to a wailing Toph, “would join me.”

“I’d go with him, Li,” Roulan said.

Nice. Support from the peanut gallery. Jet winked at the herbalist and got a scoff in reply. A large, gentle hand rested on Jet’s shoulder and both he and Li looked up to see Mushi. The old man’s eyes sparkled playfully.

“I’m sure he would enjoy that, wouldn’t you Li?” the old tea maker said, patting Li’s head.

“But I-” Li stuttered.

“I’m sure Pao won’t mind,” Mushi continued. “He’s been trying to get you to take the day off all day, after all.” He brushed his short, gray beard and smiled. “Besides, I think Zenko would like to spend her winnings, wouldn’t you Wise Lady?”

The fox Spirit tilted her foxy head back and yowled victoriously, smacking the table with her fluffy
“I’m coming to,” Toph said, suddenly gripping both Li’s and Jet’s shoulders. “I gotta get back to the Upper Ring before the curfew tonight anyway. My other friends are probably worried about me. And I’m sure two strapping young man, “ Jet beamed and Li groaned, “wouldn’t let an innocent,” everyone but Mushi scoffed, “young girl like me wander the great, big, scary city all by myself, would you?”

Jet liked this Toph person. Girl after his own heart.

“You heard the little lady,” Jet said, staring at Li’s still blushing face. “We have to be gentlemen. But only until we drop Miss Toph off with her friends. After that,” he winked, “no guarantees.”

Li looked like he was going to just sink into the floor. “But… Zenko needs a bath?” His voice lifted at the end of the sentence practically making it a question.

Unfortunately for him, a certain someone did not like that excuse. Zenko shut her mouth, stood, and strolled right up to Li, and batted his damaged ear with her paw.

Jet tsked. “You should never tell a lady she stinks, Li,” he scolded, linking his fingers behind Li’s back. “They don’t like it and they’ll bite back. You have to be graceful about it.” He looked at the fox Spirit and smiled. “A lady should be pampered. Every woman deserves a spa day. I’m sure we can grab a few scented soaps on our way to make the delivery. How d’you like that, Miss Zenko?”

The fix Spirit grinned and made a warbling sound of approval.

“There, you see?” Jet said, meeting Li’s eyes again. “Easy. Flattery will get you everywhere.”

Li sulked. It was cute. So Jet pecked him again, this time on the nose. Li’s pale gold eyes crossed to stare at the spot and Jet felt so stupidly pleased with himself. Today was turning out to be a good day.
Delivery

Chapter Summary

In which Toph and Li go with Jet to deliver an order, Zenko is not impressed, Toph gets a newsslash, and Jet sees an unwelcome face but discovers Li can take the initiative. Sometimes.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Longest chapter to date. The fluff too a serious turn in the middle, but veered back where I wanted it to at the end. Darn characters doing what they want instead of what I want.

Btw, the young woman who ordered the tea set is also a peripheral canon character. She's better remembered for a fall off a bridge and being swept down a canal during *Days of Ba Sing Se*. But canals aren't the best place to hang out in this story. Hmm~

When Mushi returned from the kitchen with the requested items, Li had forced his face back to its usual pale complexion. He ran his fingers through his short black hair self-consciously, brushing Zenko’s tails as he did so. She was still not completely happy with him after that bath comment from earlier. He’d apologized and everything, but she was still huffy about it and made no secret of it.

He really hadn’t meant to offend her. She just really needed to be cleaned. He heard a faint warble from the fox Spirit on his shoulders a second before tails batted his other cheek. He should be sorry. Honestly, the gall it took to say something so… distasteful.

Li rolled his eyes and groaned. She really could be overdramatic sometimes. This time he got a noseful of fur and sneezed. He gave Zenko an annoyed glare as he rubbed his nose.

“Here you go,” the elderly tea maker said, smiling warmly as he handed Jet a perfectly wrapped box of the requested items. “I will need the kettle and cups back soon,” he said. “We use all of our kettles already during rushes as it is.”

“Not a problem,” Jet said, taking the offered package in his arms. “Is it all there?”

He nudged the wooden lid aside to see the contents and count them just to be sure. “A thingamajig of that green dust tea-”

“Matcha,” Mushi said, humming pleasurably. “Very earthy flavor.”

“-a kettle,” Jet continued, grinning at Mushi’s interjection, “a large bowl thing-”

“Oh my dear boy,” Mushi said, actually looking a bit perturbed by Jet’s disrespect of tea. Li pressed his lips together against the amusement bubbling up in his chest.
“-two small cups, a fancy napkin, and long spoon-thing,” Jet finished. Nodding, he slid the lid of the wrapped wooden box shut and smiled at the old tea maker. “It’s all here. Not surprised, but I had to check.”

“Of course,” Mushi said, waving away Jet’s concern. “I expected it. Now, Jet, Li,” Mushi looked Li right in the eyes, “I want you both to have a nice evening. Li, that means you.” Li felt his shoulders droop under the old man’s stare. “Have fun. I’ll pop over to the potter’s complex later tonight if I can and let your family know where you are.”

Li frowned in confusion. “How do you know who my family is?” he asked.

“You’re just upset Zenko cleaned you out,” Roulan said, sipping her cooling oolong tea.

Li frowned. Then he just rolled his eyes and sighed. “You’re just upset Zenko cleaned you out,” he said, feeling a smirk tug at his lips. The kitsune on his shoulders began gekkering merrily, wagging her tails with foxy pride.

“Don’t worry, Li,” Jet said, turning on his heel and walking up to the waiter with a grin that made it very hard to focus on not blushing. “I’ll show you later tonight.”

“Show me?” Li repeated.

Toph whistled and punched him again why?

“Just keep it in your pants until I’m gone, please,” Toph said, turning and strolling easily out of the tea house. “I’m not a fan of squishy noises.”

Roulan spat out her tea and Li wanted very much to just die. Someone kill him please. Zenko was laughing at him and Jet was cackling like a mad person.

“Too much information,” Li groaned, slapping a hand over his eyes.

Toph just shrugged nonchalantly, leading the way to the train station. “You asked,” she said.

“She’s right, you know,” Jet said when Li dared to peek out over his fingers. “You did ask.”

“My mistake for thinking you were both decent people,” Li said warily. “That goes for you too,” he added to the still gekkering fox Spirit on his shoulders.

She sneezed and that was the end of that.

“So where do you need to take these?” Li asked, nodding to the package in Jet’s arms. He tucked his hands into his sleeves and gripped his wrists comfortably. “Is there something going on?”

Jet shrugged, twirling his spare straw around with his tongue. “Yeah, kind of,” he said. “Some girl’s doing a presentation at the university and ordered this stuff.”
“Why didn’t she just use her own stuff?” Toph asked, falling into step on Li’s other side.

“No clue,” Jet said. “I didn’t ask. I just get paid to pick up and deliver. Not bad, for a long day’s work.”

Toph snorted. “I bet you’re just crawling into bed from exhaustion at the end of the day, aren’t you,” she teased.

Jet leered and Li suddenly felt very uncomfortable.

“Well,” Jet said, looking right at Li as he spoke, “I’m certainly exhausted after Li works me into the dirt.”

Oh Agni.

“He’s very vigorous, you know,” he continued and Li was going to die. “Doesn’t stop until you can’t breathe and beg for mercy.” Just kill him now. “Just keeps a-pounding-”

“I will hurt you,” Li warned, sinking down as if trying to disappear into the ground or Zenko’s fur.

Jet tsked and shook his head. “See what I mean? Merciless, I tell you.”

Toph was grinning madly and ow! Agni, why? Her punches hurt.

“I like you,” Toph declared, pointing right at Jet. “You and me have gotta get together and share tips on mischief making.”

“Can do,” Jet said readily. “When I’m off work. You know how it goes.”

“Yeah, yeah. Money, food, roof. I get it,” Toph said dismissively.

Li groaned. What had he gotten himself into?

The university wasn’t as busy during this time of the day. The sun was setting, casting long dark shadows over the walls of the city. Jet strolled boldly into the university’s quad in front of the library, ignoring the odd glances thrown his way. He knew he kept odd company, but he wasn’t ashamed. Li was smoking hot and Toph had a mouth on her that made even sailor-cursing Li groan.

Chuckling, he veered to the left of the library towards the larger building there. He had no desire to meet the infamous haiku instructor in the even larger Fine Arts Department building. The deeper into the university grounds their little group went, the more people there were milling around and thus, the more odd glances were sent their way.

Actually, a lot of these people were older than the typical university student age. Many of them were probably parents and almost all of them were dressed in very nice clothes. What had Quon said? Something about a semester evaluation session thing happening tonight for the Anthropology Department? Jet had thought that meant something like an examination or whatever. Apparently, this was more along the lines of a performance or display.

Weird.

The looks didn’t bother Jet or Toph, but they did seem to bother Li. The waiter was practically sinking into himself. He didn’t speak nearly as much and kept looking around him and up at the
roofs. So, there were Dai Li here tonight. Good to know. Jet would be careful then.

“How many?” Jet said in a low tone.

Li stiffened, immediately relaxing and looking at the Anthropology building with avid interest Jet doubted he actually felt. “Two, I think,” he said. “On the roof of the library.”

“Two what?” Toph said, keeping her voice low to match Jet’s and Li’s.

“Dai Li,” Jet said, chewing his straw. “Li’s good at noticing them.”

Toph jolted, her milky white eyes widening in shock. “I didn’t even feel them,” she muttered, frowning.

She stamped her foot and tilted her head. Jet noticed she did that every now and then. He knew it had something to do with her earthbending allowing her to ‘see’, but it was a bit weird to watch.

He watched as her frown deepened into something more like frustration. “I still can’t feel them,” she muttered.

“You feel stone, right?” Li asked, glancing at the girl.

“Yeah,” she said, stomping again, harder this time.

“They’re crouching on the wooden beam running along the center of the roof,” Li said, deliberately looking in the opposite direction.

Toph blinked in surprise. “Huh.”

She punched out her fist, and Li dodged. She did not like that. She snorted and then Li jumped, slipping around Jet so Jet stood between him and Toph.

“What just happened?” Jet asked, looking between the two people on either side of him curiously. “What’d I miss?”

“She hit me with a rock,” Li grumbled, obviously sulking.

“He dodged my punch,” Toph said, shrugging easily.

“You hit me with a rock!” Li said again, louder. He glowered at the little girl over the package in Jet’s arms. “What kind of person does that?”

“Me,” Toph said. “Obviously.”

Jet laughed, earning him a golden eyed glower. The fox Spirit made a laughing sound and Li pressed his lips into a thin line, crossed his arms over his chest, and sulked. Damn, this boy was cute. He nudged Li’s hip with his own just because he could and yep, there was that blush. So predictable.

“So Li, I have to report back to my boss when I’m done delivering this tea set,” Jet said, flashing his pearly whites at the sulking waiter. “If you come with me, we can grab some scented soaps for your lovely lady friend there,” Zenko positively preened, flashing her fangs and warbling happily, “and I can show you around.”

Li hunched his shoulders and glowered at the ground. Wait for it. Wait for it.
“I guess.”

Victory.

“Thanks, Li,” he said, bumping the waiter’s hip again and smirking at the radiant blush.

“You guys are gross,” Toph grumbled.

“I haven’t even done anything,” Li said, gesturing in exasperation.

“Not yet, you haven’t,” Jet snarked and Toph snorted.

Li smacked a hand over his face yet again while Zenko crowed her foxy laughter from his shoulder, drawing several wary gazes. Jet was still snickering when he approached the door of the Anthropology building and kicked it open with his foot.

“Delivery for a tea ceremony?” he called into the room.

“Oh! That’s me!” a pretty young woman said. Her long brown hair was pulled up in an elaborate, pale green headpiece that matched her pale green dress and shawl. She carried a closed parasol in one hand and picked up her Upper Ring aristocratic silk skirt with the other. Her dainty feet peeked out from beneath her skirt as she made her way over to the small group.

When she was a bit closer, she hesitated, her face morphing into horrified disgust when she looked at Li. She covered her slip quickly with a smile, but Jet was neither stupid nor blind. He’d seen that look and felt Li shrink in on himself next to him. Damn aristocrats.

“Much obliged,” the girl said, taking the boxed tea set from Jet’s arms.

“I’m sure,” Jet said, smiling back at her with a smirk that didn’t reach his eyes.

At least the girl was good at reading the atmosphere. She cleared her throat, her brown eyes flashing to Li’s face quickly before returning to Jet’s.

“Nice, um, pet,” she said, curtsying and turning to leave.

Li bristled, gritting his teeth and glaring at the girl. She hummed and swiftly moved away. Toph harrumphed and crossed her arms in a huff. “Whoever taught her manners obviously skipped a few lessons,” she declared loudly enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear. “Honestly, what are adults teaching these days?”

Jet snorted, looping an arm around Li’s waist and guiding the waiter out of the building. “You know, for the anthropology department of the Ba Sing Se University,” he couldn’t help but add, “they really suck at studying human emotions.”

Toph grinned, then it faded as they walked out of the building. “Actually, I met this one guy who used to be a professor here,” she said grimly. “He wasn’t that bad. He loved books a bit too much, but he was… nice.”

But…

“What happened to him?” Li asked in quiet interest.

Toph’s smiled vanished completely. “He died,” she said simply. “He came with me and my friends to find this library in the Si Wong Desert that belongs to this Spirit guy.”
“Wan Shi Tong?” Li asked, straightening and staring at Toph with newfound interest in the topic. “You’ve been to Wan Shi Tong’s library?”

“Yep,” Toph chirped. “I didn’t go inside because, you know, me and books. Meh.”

Jet snickered, until he noticed the odd way Zenko was staring at the little girl. For some reason, Jet had the sneaking suspicion the fox Spirit wasn’t impressed.

“Anyway, my friends went inside and met Wan Shi Tong,” Toph continued, oblivious to Zenko’s hackles rising. “Not sure what happened exactly since I didn’t go inside, but basically one of my friends borrowed something,” Zenko bared her fangs, “and Wan Shi Tong wasn’t too happy about that so he buried his library.”

Li had also noticed the fox Spirit’s growing dislike of this story, but Toph hadn’t seemed to notice, yet.

“Almost buried my friends too,” she said. “They got out. Professor Zei didn’t.”

:Thief:

Jet about jumped out of his skin. Holy shit! The thing could talk! Well, no duh, it could talk, Zenko was a Spirit but still! She was talking in his head! And apparently Toph had heard that too because she just froze where she was, mid-stride, staring straight ahead in shock.

Zenko hopped off Li’s shoulders and padded over so she stood in front of Toph, her unnatural blue eyes wide open and staring directly at the little girl.

:Your friend lied to Wan Shi Tong.: Zenko said fiercely. :He gave his word, then broke it and stole from him.:”

“Aang wouldn’t do that!” Toph snapped, regaining some of her faculties.

Jet about spat out his straw. “You’re friends with the Avatar?!” he cried.

“What?” Li gasped, his golden eyes flashing between Zenko and Toph.

:He did.: the fox Spirit hissed, her hackles raised. :He and his Water Tribe friends promised to not use the knowledge they gained for war.: Her sky blue eyes narrowed. :Then he stole that information to do just that.:”

“But…” Toph looked gobsmacked, blinking in shock. “But Wan Shi Tong buried the library!” she argued.

:It is his library to do with as he pleases.: Zenko said, swishing her tails sharply. :The professor wished to stay, and so he shall. For eternity.:”

Jet glanced at Li who was suddenly looking very pale. The waiter knelt by the fox Spirit, his baby sparrowhawk eyes wide and haunted.

“Zenko?” he called softly. “Is it true? Is- Did Wan Shi Tong-”

:Kill the professor? He did.: Zenko said simply. :Zei has enjoyed his time in the library since. I hear he’s particularly useful when it comes to understanding human peculiarities.:”

Li blinked. “But… I thought-”
He wished to stay and learn forever, she said, shaking herself and inching closer to Li. Now he can. He has no regrets. Next time you visit, you can ask him yourself.

“You’ve been there too?” Toph demanded, jolting out of her stupor and pointing an accusing finger at Li.

Li didn’t answer. He just held Zenko’s gaze for several quiet seconds, before sighing and nodding. Whatever had passed between him and the fox Spirit, Zenko hadn’t bothered to share with Jet or Toph. Li held out his arms so Zenko could make herself comfortable there and stood, keeping his eyes cast down.

Damn it, there went the mood. Jet twiddled his straw thoughtfully, dusting it off and considering his options.

“Hey Toph,” he said suddenly. “Think you could find your own way back to your friends?” He didn’t have to look to know he’d hurt the girl’s feelings. “And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell them I’m here.”

“Why?” she asked hesitantly.

Jet rubbed his neck awkwardly. “Let’s just say, we met and didn’t get along too well,” he said. “I get the feeling Zenko here had a similar disagreement.”

The fox Spirit’s eyes were closed once more, but she didn’t need to speak to make her preferences, or lack thereof, known.

Jet chanced a glance and grimaced when he saw Toph’s small body slump in disappointment.

“See you tomorrow maybe?” he added.

Because he wasn’t really mad. He just didn’t think it was a good idea to have an already emotionally compromised Li and a fox Spirit with a grudge near an blind earthbender who could pack a punch and the Avatar gang. Not right now, anyway.

Instantly, Toph’s entire form brightened. “You bet,” she promised.

“Toph!”

Jet flinched. Damn it, and this day had been going so well too.

“On that note,” he muttered, grabbing a hold of Li’s arm, “gotta go.”

Then he bolted towards a nearby alleyway hidden by the lengthening shadows, dragging Li behind him. Unfortunately, Li was stronger than he looked.

“Wait! Toph!” Li said, tugging against Jet’s grip. “I forgot to tell you. Stay away from the canal.”

“What? Why?” Toph demanded, befuddled by the odd command.

“Found her!”

Jet yanked, barely managing to jerk Li around the corner into the narrow alley between the Fine Arts Department building and what was probably a workshop of some kind before Katara and, what do you know, the whole gang showed up. Damn it.

“Jet!” Li hissed, wriggling in Jet’s grasp. “What’re you do- MMF?!”
Not a kiss, not this time, however much Jet wished it was. He pushed Li back against the Fine Arts building wall, adjusting his arm so his hand could keep covering Li’s mouth. Li tensed when Jet stepped closer, pressing his own body close to Li’s. Jet was wearing darker clothes than Li’s long, green tunic and brown pants. And with Li’s moon pale face? Naw-uh. The guy stood out like a sore thumb.

“Long story short?” Jet whispered, his eyes fixed on Katara as she scolded Toph for running off on her own. “See that girl over there? The one in blue?”

Li paused in his frantic efforts to force Jet’s hand off his mouth to follow Jet’s gaze. He made a muffled sound of confirmation and Jet huffed.

“That’s my ex.”

He felt Li tense in shock just as something brushed his ankles. He glanced down and saw Zenko sitting on his foot, staring at the Avatar and his friend. She made no other move and made no sound. She just sat there and watched. Jet lifted his eyes to Li’s pale gold and sighed heavily.

“If I remove my hand, do you promise not to do anything obnoxious?” Jet said warily.

Li grumbled, his nails digging crescent shaped dents in Jet’s muffling hand. Suspicious gold eyes regarded Jet silently before flickering to Katara again. Then he released a pent up breath through his nose and made a muffled noise that sounded a lot like a “yes.” So Jet let his hand slide down Li’s mouth to rest on the waiter’s neck just above his shoulder.

“Like I said,” Jet began, glancing back at Katara who was finally leaving with a grumbling Toph in tow, “she’s my ex. We left on bad terms. It… It was my fault,” he admitted, feeling that familiar, sickening guilt settle in his gut. “I made a huge mistake and lost… almost everything I ever had. Again.”

He felt his shoulders hunch as if a weight had settled on them. He knew this weight. “She’d probably attack me if she ever saw me again,” he said. He could almost smile. Almost. “She’s a waterbender so she doesn’t have to be close to hit. I’d just rather not get hit at all if you know what I mean.”

Li just stood there staring at him like he was a puzzle Li was trying to figure out. It was strange and made Jet very uncomfortable. But this was Li who couldn’t lie to save his life and who had listened instead of screaming and running away. Jet wasn’t a Spiritual person, but if there were any Spirits out there with even a remote interest in him -he didn’t quite glance at Zenko- please don’t let Li leave.

“Do you…” Li hesitated and Jet waited patiently for him to continue. “Do you still like her?” Li asked quietly, his pale gold eyes gleaming in the dimming light of the sunset just out of view.

“No,” Jet said. “She’s strong. I like that. But I don’t like her. Not anymore.”

Li said nothing for a full minute. “Does she like you?” he asked eventually.

Jet scoffed. “She froze me to a tree,” he said. “Trust me, she’d sooner hit me with her water whip than like me.”

Li pursed his lips, biting the lower one and why was that so damn cute? Why?

“Do you like me?” Li asked.
Now *there* was the question. “A bit more than ‘like’, but yeah,” Jet said.

“Oh.”

That’s it? Oh? Just ‘oh’? What kind of answer was that? This was so awkward. Damn it, why did the Avatar and his crazy friends have to ruin everythi-

Oh.

Li leaned back, cheeks flushed red and his eyes looking anywhere but Jet’s face. Well, well, so Li could kiss back when he wanted to? Jet felt the smirk worm its way onto his lips before he saw Li react to it. Maybe the night wasn’t completely ruined. Jet could work with this.
Smoke

Chapter Summary

In which Zenko gets her soap, Li takes a chance, and the results are up in smoke. Perhaps literally.

Chapter Notes

A/N: It occurred to me that I never did explain who/what 'Yu Huang' was. Yu Huang is another name for the Jade Emperor in Chinese mythology. I thought he was the perfect patron Spirit for the Earth Kingdom all things considered.

It had taken a whole lot of self restraint to not push Li against the Fine Arts building and kiss him senseless. Jet needed to get paid and every hour he spent delaying was an hour he didn’t have his pay and bonus from Quon. Not to mention all the things he planned to do with Li before he had to leave and get back to his place before curfew.

But Spirits, the temptation. Jet was weak.

At least he got to hold Li’s hand the whole way to Quon’s Middle Ring office. That had kept a smile on his face and a blush in Li’s cheeks. Even Zenko was prancing merrily on the ground next to Li. Jet was going to take Li out and show him a night in Ba Sing Se. But first…

“Quon!” he called, cupping his hand over his mouth as they walked through the front door. “I’m back.”

There was a muffled rustling of papers from the back room before Quon’s familiar face appeared. Jet knew the moment Quon noticed Li and Zenko because the aristocrat’s eyebrows flew upwards in pleased surprise. He nodded to Jet.

“How did the delivery go?” the merchant asked, an easy smile on his face.

“Well,” Jet replied, squeezing Li’s hand briefly before approaching his boss. “I’ll have to pick everything back up and return it to the tea shop tomorrow morning though.”

“Understandable,” Quon said, nodding.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a string of coins. Making sure his movements were in plain view, he counted out Jet’s usual pay as well as the bonus for bringing Li and Zenko. Jet couldn’t wait to spend the bonus on Li. The rest of it would go to his, ‘Bee’s, and Longshot’s personal use.

“There you go,” Quon said, handing the coins to Jet. Then he lifted his gaze to Li and smiled, holding out a hand in greeting. “You must be Li,” he said, when Li just stood there in bewilderment. “Jet’s told me a lot about you. You can call me Quon.”
Li blinked once before extending his hand and clasping Quon’s in a firm handshake. “Li,” he said, blushing. “But you already knew that,” he mumbled, shooting a glower at Jet who just winked back.

“I did. And who’s this?” Quon asked, crouching down to get a better look at the fox Spirit. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it before.”

“She’s a fox,” Li said, shifting his feet and holding out his hands for Zenko to hop into. As the fox Spirit made herself comfortable in Li’s arms, Quon stood and watched.

Quon nodded slowly, his brown eyes sparkling with avid interest. “I really have never seen anything like her before,” he said. After a moment, he extended a hand, pausing before he could actually touch. “May I?” he asked, eyes on Li.

The waiter considered Quon for a moment before shrugging. “If she allows it,” he said.

Jet studied Zenko for any sign of disapproval. He really didn’t want to get fired because his boss got bitten by a fox Spirit. No one would ever buy that story, even if it was true. So when Zenko leaned out and bumped her nose against Quon’s hand, Jet breathed a sigh of relief.

Quon smiled as his fingers brushed the fox Spirit’s head before moving down to scratch underneath her chin. Zenko opened her mouth and made a warbling sound that was both cute and an encouragement to continue.

“She’s beautiful,” Quon said. “Where did you find her?”

Li hesitated before answering. “The Si Wong Desert,” he answered. “She’d been injured by a swarm of buzzard-hornets.”

Jet didn’t know that. Li sucked at lying and Zenko made no move to display her disapproval, so it had to be true. But really? That was odd. What kind of Spirit got hurt by buzzard-hornets, of all things? Something must have happened before Li got there. Probably something involving the Avatar.

Quon hummed. “Fascinating,” he murmured, rubbing his chin. “I hope she’s doing better now. Does she have a name?”

“Zenko,” Li said, still not sure what to make of the merchant. His pale gold eyes flickered to Jet hesitantly before returning to Quon. “Her name’s Zenko.”

“Zenko.” The merchant smiled when the fox Spirit began wagging her tails and making that squeaky warble she made when she was pleased with herself. “I suppose you’re the tea shop mascot I’ve heard so much about,” Quon said.

“She’s more than that,” Li said, glancing at Jet uncomfortably.

The fox Spirit sat up and shook herself before curling up in Li’s arms so the merchant couldn’t pet her anymore. Jet snickered and returned to his hopefully boyfriend’s side. He was pleased to note the tension that had steadily built up in Li’s shoulders eased when he approached. Another point for his ego.

“Well, on that note,” Jet said, conspicuously slipping his arm around Li’s waist, “we need to be off. Got things to do before curfew.” He winked and Quon chuckled.

“I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow then,” he said, waving the two boys out of the shop.
Jet tossed a careless wave over his shoulders, enjoying the weight of his now full purse tucked securely in his shirt by his belt. The moment they stepped back out onto the road, Li sighed and his shoulders drooped in relief. Jet snickered.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” he said, squeezing Li’s waist with his fingers. “He can be a bit much. But he pays well so I tolerate it.”

“It’s fine.”

Yeah, Li really sucked at lying.

“It wasn’t though, was it?” Jet said. He knew he wouldn’t get a verbal answer so he shrugged it off. “So, what should we do first? Get some scented soaps for your little lady or get some grub?”

Li blinked and tilted his head in confusion. “Grub?” he said, his mouth twisted in barely concealed disgust.

“I mean food,” Jet said, leaning teasing into Li and forcing the other boy to stagger under his weight before standing straight again. “You want food, I guess?”

Zenko barked sharply, making a series of low warbling sounds which made her thoughts on that idea very clear. Li flushed and stared at the fox Spirit in mild annoyance.

“I guess not,” Li grumbled.

“Alright. Soaps it is,” Jet said, striding down the road to the nearest row of nice Middle Ring shops.

Most of the shops were beginning to close up for the night, but a few were still open. Li let Jet lead them down the cobblestone road to a particular shop that had sprigs of lavender and cinnamon dangling from the overhang near the open front door. A small ‘Open’ sign still hung from a nail on the exterior wall by the shop door but it probably wouldn’t be there for much longer. Li could see who he supposed was the owner cleaning the floor inside through the front window.

Jet walked right into the place with the aire of a customer who had enough money to actually buy something in here. It may not have been Jet who would be spending any money here, but just a glance at the prices of some of the soaps on display made Li’s eyes grow wide and his stomach sink. Why would anyone pay so much money for soap?

Stinky soap. Li could smell the shop before he even walked in. Now that he was in, his nose was on overdrive. He could only imagine how Zenko was handling all of the intense smells.

“I’m afraid animals aren’t allowed in here.”

Li stiffened and Zenko bristled. With a groan, he rolled his eyes and began backing out of the store when Jet’s fingers suddenly tightened around his waist.

“Actually, since she’s the real customer here,” Jet said, nodding to Zenko still in Li’s arms, “I think you should let her stay. She won’t touch anything,” Jet added quickly, holding up a hand to stall the shopkeeper’s arguments. “She won’t even touch the floor. She’ll stay in Li’s arms the whole time.”
The shopkeeper, a dainty Middle Ring woman with wide brown eyes and wrinkles by her mouth, grimaced. Her eyes quickly darted over both Jet’s and Li’s clothes, easily determining they were from the Lower Ring. When her eyes lingered on Li’s face a bit longer than was necessary, Li frowned and looked away.

“We have the money,” Jet said, holding out his free hand to Li expectantly.

Li sighed but dug out the small pouch of Zenko’s winnings from the Mah Jong game and held it up for the shopkeeper to see. She pursed her lips in displeasure but shrugged and gestured vaguely to the display. Obviously money was more important than her customers’ appearances. Money all looked the same.

“Just ask before touching anything,” she said, turning back to sweeping up the floor. “We close shortly.”

“Ignore her,” Jet whispered, leaning uncomfortably close to Li’s ear. Louder, he said to Zenko, “You’re up, little lady. Anything interest you?”

The fox Spirit’s gray-black head lifted, ears perked and nose twitching rapidly. She turned her head around the shop, taking in the scents, before focusing on a particular rack of display soaps near the back of the shop. She leaned her head out so her nose was closer to the scent she’d noticed and Li moved towards the rack.

There were a handful of soaps here that were mostly rectangular in shape but had things embedded in the soaps. Zenko leaned out so she was half out of Li’s arms and began wagging her tails when she picked which soap she wanted. Jet plucked the bar out of the rack and examined it.

“Lavender,” he said, smirking. “You really are a girly-girl, aren’t you?” He held out his hand and Li handed him Zenko’s winnings. Closing his fingers around the coins, he grinned and walked off. “Be right back.”

Li absently scratched Zenko’s fur as he watched Jet haggle with the shopkeeper. When Jet came back, he handed Li back what was left of Zenko’s winnings and shook his head.

“I tried to talk her down on the price a bit,” he said, nudging Li out of the store. “but she wasn’t having it. Apparently ‘Lower Ring scum’ aren’t worth haggling with.” He spat on the ground, startling Li. “What a bitch.”

“At least we have the soap,” Li said, and Zenko warbled her agreement.

Jet grinned and reached for his straw, taking it out and poking Li’s cheek with the end. “True,” he said, a sly grin on his face. “You know what that means? I can finally take your sexy self,” Li about died of embarrassment, “out on a date.”

Zenko made her gekkering laughter that just helped darken Li’s intense blush. He jumped when Jet slid his arm around his waist again, tapping his fingers on his hip bone teasingly. The fact Jet was now pressed up against Li’s left side only made Li’s nerves tingle all the more intensely. He could see Jet there, but he couldn’t see him as clearly as he would prefer.

He knew Jet could clearly see the nasty red scar covering most of the left side of his face. But, for some reason, Jet didn’t seem at all bothered by it. Jet didn’t shy away from looking at or touching Li’s left cheek, but he didn’t linger too long to be uncomfortable for Li either. He just treated the scar like it was a part of Li’s cheek: there and important, but not a defining feature that could make or break who and what Li was.
It did things to his heart that a healer like Roulan would probably be alarmed by. Well, Li reconsidered, maybe not Roulan. She was too... irreverent. But it would certainly make a serious healer concerned. Perhaps it was a good thing Li didn’t know anyone too serious about anything. Minus Mushi and his obsession with tea.

Jet took Li to a noodle restaurant close to the Ba Sing Se University. This area was slightly cheaper to cater to the university students but was still respectable enough to cater to the regular Middle Ring citizens as well. The restaurant was really more of a large, covered pavilion that was open to the elements on all four sides. The kitchen was located in the center of the building where the customers could watch the cooks work. Everywhere that wasn’t a part of the kitchen was filled with wooden tables and chairs for customers to sit and eat.

The place was already full of customers talking, joking, eating, and drinking so they had to wait a bit before being seated. Since the place was practically outside, Li was relieved when no one mentioned Zenko. In fact, the more he looked at the crowd, the more animals he saw. There was a catowl perched on the back of a chair at one table, a white cat purring in an Upper Ring woman’s lap, and an iguana-parrot sitting on a young university student’s shoulder.

Li couldn’t explain it but something about the iguana-parrot made Li absolutely terrified. He felt heat and could feel his face burning from something that wasn’t a blush. He could almost remember... He didn’t want to remember. If it was terrifying, then maybe it was best if he didn’t think about it. Not here. Not while he was on a... date with Jet.

Now he was blushing. So he looked away and refused to look back in that direction the entire time he and Jet were at the restaurant. He focused on eating and listening to Jet talk instead. The noodles were great, not as tasty as that little noodle booth in the Lower Ring, surprisingly enough, but still great. He would definitely not mind eating here again, if he could afford it.

Jet had batted Li’s hand and purse away and paid their check. All of it. Including Zenko’s bowl of noodles. It was strange and somewhat off-putting. Li didn’t like the thought of being reliant on someone else.

“Look at it this way,” Jet said when Li found the courage to voice his thoughts, “you took the day off to be with me. You could have been working but you came with me instead. I, on the other hand, literally just got paid my usual with a bonus on top of that. So I’m paying this time. You can pay next time.”

He may have blushed. But if he did, it was because Jet kissed his ear. No other reason. None. Stop laughing Zenko! Tails batted his ankle and Agni why? Calloused fingers twined with his own and now he was definitely blushing.

“So,” Jet said, looking at him with a grin, bouncing his eyebrows up to his hairline briefly, “anything else you want to do tonight before we head back?”

He swung their hands idly as he led Li down the road towards the general direction of the train station. They passed another row of restaurants and shops still open. Colorful paper lanterns hanging on string crisscrossed the road above them, filling the area with a warm light. It wasn’t as festive and energetic as the restaurant district in the Lower Ring, but it was welcoming.

“Um,” Li mumbled, glancing around him curiously, “nothing I can think of at the moment.”

Zenko prancing next to Li’s feet made a chirrup sound and suddenly he remembered the paper spells in his pockets. Why would the fox Spirit want to remind him of those? Why did he even grab them to begin with? It had been her idea. Think Li. Zenko never did something unless she had a
good reason. What reason would she have to…

He stopped right in the middle of the road and stared at the little fox Spirit in wary surprise. She stopped as well and sat right in front of him. She curled her tails around her feet and tilted her head back so her sightless eyes regarded him calmly.

He wasn’t ready.

How did he know?

He knew. He just did. He didn’t know what he was doing.

Learn by doing.

What if he made a mistake?

Then he could learn from it.

He sighed and let his head fall in weary resignation. “Can... “

This was supposed to be a fun night. Why did his life constantly want to toss things like this at him? What did he do to deserve this? He sighed.

“Can we go to the canal?” he asked softly, glancing shyly up at Jet.

Brown eyes narrowed before Jet nodded. “Sure,” he said. “I just thought you wanted to avoid it.”

It wasn’t quite a question, but it deserved an answer.

“I do,” he said. “But she wants me to.” He nodded to Zenko. “She wants me to… do something there.”

Zenko wagged one of her tails drawing Jet’s gaze. Li waited in tense silence while Jet mulled it over.

“Alright,” Jet said. “On one condition.”

Agni, if you have any mercy, please don’t be anything serio-

“I get to make out with you until you can’t breathe tonight.”

“That’s fi- What?!”

He should have known. He really should have known. Of course Jet would make something like that the condition. Not that he was complaining, but he really should have known.

“You heard me,” Jet said. He leaned right into Li’s personal space, an arrogant smirk on his face and omnipresent straw in his mouth. “Unless you want me to repeat it,” he leaned closer, “loud enough for everyone in the area to hear,” Li was going to die, “then seal the deal with a ki-”

“Okay! I get it!” Li said loudly, slapping a hand over Jet’s mouth and - “Son of a hog-monkey!” Li yanked his hand back and rubbed it vigorously on his tunic while Jet threw his head back and laughed at him.

“Spirits, Li,” Jet crowed, tucking his hands in his pockets and strolling down the road towards the canal still laughing. “You have the best curses.”
“You licked my fucking hand!” Li cried, racing after Jet red-faced and furious.

“Yep.”

“You licked my hand!” Li repeated.

“Yes I did,” Jet said, grinning unrepentantly. “You taste good.”

Li was going to fracture and break and sink right into the road if Jet didn’t grab his boyfriend by the arm and make sure Li kept moving. Zenko seemed to be on Jet’s side which was a huge ego boost. It never hurt to have the Spirits, or at least one Spirit, on his side. He wouldn’t look a gift ostrich-horse in the mouth.

“Come on pretty boy,” he said, just because he couldn’t resist rubbing it in. “Let’s go have a romantic moment by the canal.”

And yep, Li was sulking. He wouldn’t push him any further right now. He wanted to make out with Li but he wanted Li to want to do it to. He didn’t want Li to do it because he felt like he had to. Willing lips were so much tastier than unwilling.

This section of the canal bisected the restaurant district of the Middle Ring so it was well lit and full of meandering people. Couples strolled over or sat on the rims of the stone bridges that crossed the canal at even intervals. Trees blooming with early Spring buds dotted the edges of the canal between the pedestrian road and the water.

“Hey, check it out,” Jet said, pausing to lean against the stone railing of the bridge. He felt more than saw Li step close to his side, but the waiter didn’t lean against the railing. He nodded to the west where the sky was growing more black than dusky purple. “You can see the university from here.”

Li did look, but he still didn’t lean on the railing. The fox Spirit hopped up onto the stone though and stared down into the water, her tails twitching ever so slightly.

“Will this work?” he asked quietly, tilting his head to Li while his eyes turned to Zenko. “Or do you want to go to the bridge by the university?” He lowered his voice a bit more and added, “I mean, I’m assuming this has something to do with the Woman in White, right?”

Now Li did lean against the bridge’s railing next to Jet. “I think… This should work,” he said softly. “Just as long as no one sees.”

Jet looked at Li in disbelief. When pale gold eyes flashed to his, Jet made a point to looking at all of the people and lights around them, lifting his eyebrows.

“Right,” he said wryly. “Well, I can’t guarantee we won’t be seen. But I can almost guarantee we won’t be noticed.”

Li blinked, then nodded. So he understood. Good. Crowds saw everything, but they very rarely noticed anything unless it was unique or eye catching. As long as Li was subtle, they should just vanish into the crowd as the proverbial background noise. So, what did the little foxy lady want Li to do?

Jet watched as Li carefully slipped his hand into one of the inner pockets of his tunic and pull out a
thin strip of paper. Jet frowned when he recognized one of Li’s calligraphy doodles drawn on the paper in black paint. Li stared at the paper like it had all the answers to every question he hadn’t asked and didn’t want to ask. Okay, maybe this was a bit more serious than Jet originally thought.

Zenko trotted down the railing until she was on Li’s right side and sat down. She was blocking the line of sight up the bridge from the walkway on that side of the canal. Slowly, careful to keep his movements casual, Jet shifted his body so he blocked the sight lines from the walkway on his side of the canal. Zenko flicked her ears at him then turned her sightless eyes to Li.

The waiter took a deep breath, stared at the strip of paper, and whispered something that sounded suspiciously like, “Please work.”

Then Li blew a puff of air at the strip of calligraphed paper and Jet blinked when the paper suddenly stiffened. It no longer swayed loosely with the light breeze blowing across the canal water. And was it just Jet or were those painted characters glowing? It was dim. Jet would have missed it entirely if he hadn’t been looking for something unusual. This was Li and Zenko, after all. Expect the unusual.

And yes, the paint was glowing. It was subtle and soft. It could almost be a dull reflection of the golden light from the lanterns. Like embers in a dying fire. Wary but intrigued, Jet couldn’t tear his eyes away from Li’s hands. Swordsman’s hands.

“Jet.”

He lifted his gaze from Li’s hands to those golden sparrowhawk eyes. Eyes that were currently full of a quiet fear that set Jet’s nerves on edge and spoke volumes about something Jet wasn’t sure he wanted to understand.

“If this works,” Li whispered, almost too softly to be heard over the rumble of the crowd around and beyond them, “then it might…” He swallowed thickly and Jet could practically see Li withdrawing from something, from him. “I, um… I’m not very good at this. I’m still learning. I didn’t know about… this ability until a little over a week ago. I’m not sure of anything I’m doing and I haven’t been able to do anything significant with it until this morning helping with the-” He licked his lips nervously. “The kilns. Ying and, um, Than know and… Cheng, the potter guildmaster’s son, he figured it out. But no one… No one else knows. I don’t…”

Li fell silent and stared fixedly at the stiffened paper in his hand, lowering it so it hovered just above the stone’s surface. His fingers were shaking minutely and Li’s cheeks were the same sickly pale they had been this morning.

“Just…” Li swallowed and sighed. “If you don’t want to s-stay with me after this, then… I’ll understand.”

He was lying. Li was lying. Jet knew Li was lying. Li knew Jet knew he was lying. But he was still lying. Why?

“Just, whatever you do,” Li licked his lips, “please don’t tell anyone. I just… If you like me as much as,” a faint flush blossomed in Li’s cheeks, “I l-like you,” Jet’s straw may have fallen out of his mouth, “then please, don’t hate me. Please.”

What, by Yu Huang, could possibly be so horrible that Li would say something like that? Jet glanced at Zenko but the fox Spirit made no move to challenge Li’s words. In fact, she sat still, completely still, as if she was waiting for something. And her closed eyes were fixed on Jet’s face.
Jet hesitated, then dropped his gaze back to Li’s timid sparrowhawk eyes. He dipped his head, questioning the move almost immediately after he did it. He had seen a lot of things in his life. Death, destruction, war, Spirits, Li. He’d lost everything and come to Ba Sing Se to start over, to try to find something he could call his own. Something that would fill the gaping chasm in his heart after losing the forest, the Freedom Fighters, his family, everything.

He found Li.

He didn’t want to lose Li.

So he kept his mouth shut and watched.

Li pressed the stiff calligraphed paper to the stone and lifted his right hand so his ring and pinky fingers were folded down with his thumb brushing his ring finger. His index and middle fingers he kept straight, pressing the index finger to his lips, and whispered something that sounded like a prayer to…

Agni.

The paper flashed in a soft, quiet blaze of orange-red leaving only the calligraphy that had been on the paper behind. The characters the were burned into the stone, flickering like dying embers.

Dying firebent embers.

Li was a firebender.
Leave

Chapter Summary

In which Li tries to explain and Jet tries to accept.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I meant to write more, but the severe weather is getting worryingly close so I'm posting what I have while I can. My place is notorious for losing power in bad weather. We've already had at least one tornado near Atlanta tonight. Alabama had it worse. Pray for Alabama. They had a huge, dangerous, long-track tornado. They need all the support they can get. Nighttime tornadoes are hellish.

It worked. It really worked. The flood of relief and pride made his legs shake worse than they already were. Zenko warbled and nuded his unscarred cheek with her wet nose. She was proud of him. She knew he could do it. He shouldn’t have doubted her. He had to do this outside of the protection of Wan Shi Tong’s library and research eventually. Now was as good a time as any.


Oh Agni. It was gone. The relief, the pride, Zenko’s reassuring presence, everything. It was all gone. There was just the rumble of the crowd around them, the roar of the blood in Li’s ears, the tingling in his legs pleading with him to flee, and the selfish hope in his chest weighing on his heart and keeping him still. Here. Now.

Please, Jet. Please, don’t hate him.

Li swallowed over his dry throat. Why? Why now, Zenko? Why did she want him to do this now?

Was he blaming her for this?

No. He just wanted to know… No. There wasn’t anyone to blame. He hadn’t done anything wrong.

No. He hadn’t.

Right. He’d just done something that would earn him a death sentence if the Dai Li found out. Nothing serious.

His chest hurt. He felt hot. His head was pulsing. His chest hurt so bad. Say something. Jet? Say something, please. Why couldn’t Li look at him? Why couldn’t Li speak? He couldn’t find the words. He was too scared to move, too scared to speak, too scared to breathe.

A damp nose pressed against his unscarred cheek and Zenko whined right by his ear. He gasped. Oh. He’d been holding his breath. Shit. No wonder his chest had hurt so bad. He gasped, leaning heavily on the stone railing.
He was panicking. Damn it all. He had to calm down and think. If Jet rejected Li, he would… He would understand. He would.

Why did that thought feel like ash slipping through his fingers? Just like the memories he lost. He was going to lose everything. Again.

How? How had Jet wormed his way into Li’s heart, his entire life so quickly and effectively? Removing Jet would be like trying to unweave a tightly woven silk rug. Doable, but incredibly painful and difficult. So many feelings, so many memories, so many… Just so many.

Agni, if you cared about a pathetic firebender like Li, then please don’t take Jet away from him. He didn’t want to lose him.

He breathed an unsteady sigh and forced himself to turn his head just enough so he could see Jet clearly with his one good eye. He immediately wished he hadn’t. Jet’s brown eyes were wide and staring fixedly at the firebent characters flickering dimly on the stone railing. Jet wasn’t moving. He was barely breathing.

Li quickly looked away, dropping his gaze to the incriminating spell glinting in the lantern light around them. Say something.

“I-it’s a spell,” he whispered past the knot in his throat, threatening to stop his breathing. “It’ll keep malicious Spirits like the…” He took a deep breath, hoping the fresh night air would soothe his nerves. It didn’t. “…the, uh, Woman in White away from here,” he finished weakly. “They can’t cross within thirty feet of this.”

He brushed his fingers just short of the firebent spell. He didn’t dare wipe away the dim embers. They needed to keep burning for as long as possible. As long as they burned, the spell would hold. It had to hold. At least through the night. Night.

“Agni,” he whispered, leaning back and staring at the spell. “Not Agni.” He looked up at the night sky in shock. “Tui. The moon is new. There is no moon. That’s why you wanted me to do this tonight.”

Zenko chirped, extending her front paws, arching her back, and yawning in a pleased stretch.

“But…” Li hesitated. “But fire spells are weaker at night even without the moon’s interference,” he said, looking back at his spell. “If the Woman in White pushes, she’ll break through. It’s… I’m not strong enough to hold it if she pushes. I can’t protect them.”

Besides, Jet.

Right. Jet. And there went his mood. Again.

Li winced and reluctantly turned his gaze to Jet. The Earth Kingdom boy had reached out with one hand and was trailing a finger along the edge of the firebent calligraphy. He hadn’t spoken a word since Li… bent.

Suddenly he couldn’t find words again. So he watched.

Jet remained silent, brushing the very edges of each character. His face showed no emotion, but his eyes were full of emotions. They raced past faster than Li could identify them.

“I-I’m sorry,” he breathed.
He hadn’t meant for this to happen, even though he now knew it needed to. Just like he hadn’t meant to say that in a voice that cracked like the future he’d dared to let himself dream of. His sight blurred and a trail of warm dampness slipped down his cheek. He looked away, at the dark water flowing smoothly under the canal bridge.

“I didn’t know,” he pleaded. Why couldn’t he speak louder? Why couldn’t he find the strength to look at Jet? “I swear I didn’t know until a week ago. Fire is-” He cut himself off when a paw stepped deliberately on his hand. “I lost everything to Fire. And then I find I have Fire? That I am Fire?”

He huffed a laugh. Why? This wasn’t funny. He stared at his reflection in the dark, rippling water and hated it.

“I made a deal with Wan Shi Tong,” he said. “In exchange for protecting Zenko, he wants me to do something for him. First, he wants me to learn a firebending style that’s been lost. No one knows it, no one knows how to do it. Everyone who did is dead. All the writings on it are gone, burned by the Fire Nation.” He watched his reflection’s lips stretch in a grin that didn’t reach his eyes. “How ironic is that? The Fire Nation’s history lost to Fire.” He snorted. “Now I have to find that style, learn it, and become a-” he scoffed, “a Fire Sage.”

He could feel Zenko staring at him with her sightless eyes. She wasn’t happy with him. She wasn’t happy with his words.

“You want to know the best part?” He couldn’t resist. “I remember things sometimes. Little things, flashes, every now and then. The most innocuous things will trigger a thought, like the absolute knowledge that someone somewhere wants me dead. A feeling, like being surrounded by heat and the gut-wrenching surety that I’ve been betrayed. An image, like a fist planting itself on my eye and burning my face off because I couldn’t dodge. Words.” He hated this. “Words like ‘She was born lucky. You were lucky to be born.’”

Zenko was swishing her tails in warning. Li ignored it.

“But I gave Wan Shi Tong my word,” he said, glaring down at his reflection. “I’ll learn that style, one way or another. I’ll learn it and become a Fire Sage. I already know some things because someone… someone I once cared for taught me. Someone I can’t remember.”

It still hurt knowing he couldn’t remember that person.

“He also wants my memories,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “The ones I’m making, the ones I will make, and eventually, the ones I lost. He wants to know. He wants to learn.” He couldn’t look at his reflection. It hated what he saw there too much. “I write down everything I know, everything I see and experience, everything I… remember.” Breathe. In, hold, out. “I don’t know who I was. I don’t think I want to know. I’m afraid of that person.”

He glanced at Jet again. He hadn’t moved except to hang his head. He was so close, and yet Li could feel the distance between them with every second Jet refused to speak or look at him. Shyly, Li moved his own hand slowly over the stone railing towards Jet’s hand. Maybe he could…

Please.

Jet folded his fingers, avoiding Li’s wayward touch.

He understood. He did.

He’d leave.
“Don’t worry about the tea ceremony set,” Li said. Why did it feel like he wasn’t the one talking anymore? “I’ll get it tomorrow morning.” Why did he feel so detached? “I’ll stay away. If I see you in the tea house, I’ll-” He gulped. “I’ll stay in the kitchen. Out of sight. You won’t see me ever again. I’ll make sure of it.”

He didn’t want to leave. Jet. Please don’t let him leave.

“I, um.” Agni, it wasn’t like he had anything to lose. Please don’t jinx it. “I do like you,” he murmured, just loud enough for Jet to hear. “A lot.”

He stepped away from the railing, slowly, deliberately. Stop him. He gazed down at Jet’s face, hidden by his messy brown hair that always made Li calmer somehow. Stop him, please.

“Goodbye, Jet,” he said.

Please. Stop him.

Please?

He turned around and took one step. Then another. Then another. Then another.

...please…

:I thought better of you.:  
He thought better of Li.

:Do you really mean that?:

...no… He just didn’t understand. Li had only told one lie, and it hadn’t been about liking him. That had been the truth. Everything had been the truth. Except when Li said he understood why Jet hadn’t spoken to him. Jet didn’t know why he hadn’t spoken to Li. He just… couldn’t.

He’d been shocked and hurt and afraid. Of Li. Of all people, Jet was afraid of Li. Li who couldn’t lie, even in a situation like this. Li who was so ridiculously easy to fluster. Li who cursed like a sailor. Li who cried and clung to him when two children were murdered just this morning.

Was it really just this morning?

They’d been killed with fire.

:And sealed to their fate by an earthbent door.:  
Fire took everything from him. It took his family, his home, his childhood. He’d grown up too fast. He hated the Fire Nation. He hated it.

But not Li. He didn’t hate Li. And that scared him.

Li said he liked him.

:He meant it.:  
Of course he did. Jet would know if Li ever tried to lie. Like when Li said he’d understand if Jet
wanted to leave him. That had been a lie. A very bad one. It had been so obvious in every single way.

Li hadn’t understood. But he’d tried to there at the end.

The end.

He didn’t want it to be the end.

“Wait.”

He straightened. Zenko was right. Li had meant it when he told Jet he liked him. Jet had meant it too.

Li could firebend, but what had he used his firebending for? Just now, Li said the spell he burned into the stone would keep this area safe from malicious Spirits. Zenko would not have tolerated a lie like that. Besides, Jet had been listening and that hadn’t been a lie.

What else had Li used his firebending for? Li said the potter guildmaster’s son knew he was a firebender and Li had been at the potter’s complex this morning. Jet would be stunned if Li hadn’t tried to save those children with his bending somehow.

Both times Jet was certain Li had used his firebending, it had been to help someone else.

“Wait.”

He turned around and-

He wasn’t there. Li wasn’t there. Jet straightened in surprise. Li was gone. He’d actually left.

:He said he would.:

Jet scanned the roads, both the one extending out from the bridge through the center of the restaurant district as well as the one paralleling the canal. Nothing. Li was gone.

He turned to the fox Spirit who still sat on the bridge railing gazing at Jet with her wide, unnatural blue eyes. Her regard was calm but Jet could feel her heavy disappointment weighing on him. Li had trusted him and Jet had let him down.

He’d let him walk away.

“Do you know where he went?” he asked the Spirit.

She tilted her head. :Why do you want to know?:

Jet grimaced. “I need to apologize,” he said. “I lost everything once. I’m not letting Li slip away now.”

Zenko flicked her ears in interest. :Even though he’s a firebender?:

Jet winced. That did make him uncomfortable still. He would need time for that. But he wasn’t going to do it alone. Not if he could help it. Besides, Jet still wanted to kiss Li until the boy couldn’t breathe. That desire hadn’t changed. His feelings hadn’t changed.

“Where is he?” he demanded.
The fox Spirit tilted her head, flicking her ears. :*Follow me.*:

She closed her eyes and hopped off the railing onto the bridge then bounded down towards the road paralleling the canal. Jet followed. He still wasn’t okay with this. He still wasn’t sure what he thought about this. But he wasn’t letting Li slip through his fingers. He’d lost too much already for that.
In which Li meets someone he wasn’t expecting and realizes he made a mistake.

No one noticed him. No one even looked at him. He was invisible in plain sight. How many times had he wanted this in the past few weeks? How many times had he wanted so badly to be unnoticed by curious eyes or whispers behind polite hands? Now he had it. But at what price?

Funny how things worked out this way. Whoever tried to kill him must have thought he was as good as dead if they left him alone to rot in that ghost town. Whoever he had been before he woke up with nothing was dead. Li didn’t want to know who that person had been.

And yet, he wanted to know so desperately it drove his every action. He wanted to know, to learn, to understand. Why did someone try to kill him? What had he done that was so horrible it deserved such a fate? He hadn’t even been cremated. He’d just been left to the crow-buzzards or whatever else wanted to eat him. If he hadn’t woken up when he had, what would have happened to him?

He would never have met Ying and Than and precious little Hope. He would never have come to Ba Sing Se. He would never have met Roulan and Mushi and Toph. He would never have met Jet.

His sight wavered once more as a trail of damp warmth slid down his good cheek. He heaved a sigh that stuttered with pent up emotion. Deliberately, he looked away from the festive lanterns and the buzz of the crowds bustling between restaurants to his right and gazed at the quiet darkness of the canal water. He had passed outside the protection of his spell but he hadn’t felt a single Spirit yet.

Not that he was in much of a state to really pay attention at the moment. He shook himself. This was a night of the new moon. Without Agni or Tui to keep watch, Spirits could roam freely. But so far, Li had only seen a few fireflies dancing between the trees planted along the canal’s edge. Nothing else.

He barely noticed the lights beginning to dim as he drifted further from the center of the restaurant district and closer to the university campus. Once he stepped foot onto the green space between the campus and the restaurants, the volume and brightness faded significantly. Only a handful of pagodas set at even distances along the path glowed a soft green from the crystals within. He was close to the train station.

Back where he started this night. The wall surrounding the main campus of the Ba Sing Se University was just ahead. The Anthropology building still glowed against the dark southeastern sky but it wasn’t as bright as it had been earlier that evening. The festivities must have started inside.

There were only a few people in the green space which suited Li just fine. The trees rustled in the evening breeze that smelled faintly of saltwater. Strange how he could still smell the brackish water so far away from Full Moon Bay. There were more fireflies here in the darkness, flashing calmly as they hovered low to the ground. As the evening wore on, they would slowly move up into the tree branches, twinkling like the stars.
Li could almost remember doing something like this before, a long time ago. But the stars were different then and the air was warmer, like the arms wrapped around his shoulders. He could almost hear the voice behind him, soft and feminine and loving. Mother?

Gone.

Just like everything that mattered.

He looked to his left and there was the bridge where he and Jet had first seen the Woman in White. She wasn’t there now. No one was there. The white stone of the bridge seemed to glow in the green light from the pagodas. It would be a dark night tonight. Dark and, if Zenko was right and Li did nothing, potentially dangerous. So many people in close proximity…

He sighed. Well, he was here. He might as well give it another try. He wasn’t sure if he had the chi strength needed to sustain two protective spells, but he wouldn’t know if he didn’t try. He looked around him, making sure to scan the roofs too just in case. Nothing. He was alone.

Why did that thought feel so painfully familiar?

Shaking his head, Li took a deep breath and approached the bridge. It was quiet here. Peaceful. He stepped through the grass, his eyes flickering over the stone bridge, looking for somewhere to burn his spell. It had probably been a bit unwise to burn his spell into the middle of the bridge in the restaurant district. It was in plain sight. Anyone could see it. Even the Dai Li. Li would have to be more careful this time.

There was a moss covered stone nestled in the grass and flowers between the left side of the bridge and a large weeping willow. A lit pagoda stood on the right side of the bridge shedding the calming green light over the vicinity. Li knelt on the grass by the mossy stone and examined the left side of the bridge. There was some moss along the bottom and tall reeds and grass blades brushed the stone further up.

It would be better to burn his spell here than somewhere else. Wood would scorch and could harm the tree. The spell would last longer on wood, but Li wasn’t familiar enough with this area to determine whether there were lesser Spirits who could accidentally be harmed by his spell’s physical requirements. Stone was strong, sturdy, and could take a lot of abuse before caving. The tall grass and reeds would help hide the scorched calligraphy too. Hopefully.

He pulled out his handful of paper spells, shuffling through them until he found the one he wanted. Tucking the rest back into his tunic pocket, he held up his chosen spell and breathed on it. The painted characters glowed dimly as he brushed away the tall grass and held the paper against the stone with his left hand. With his right, he folded down his pinky and ring fingers, brushing his thumb against his ring finger. He pressed his middle finger against his index which he held lightly to his lips.

“Agni,” he whispered as softly as he could, “protect this place. Let no shadow slip your watch. Ignite these flames and burn away malevolence.”

The paper burned away instantly leaving behind just the smoldering letters on the stone bridge. It should last through the night. When the sun rose tomorrow, there would be a bit more protection. Li would never be as powerful as Agni himself. He didn’t want to be.

Closing his eyes, he leaned forward and rested his forehead against the cool stone. He was so tired, physically and emotionally. He needed to sleep. He needed to speak to Wan Shi Tong. He needed to rest.
Something pressed against his senses. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. No. He leaned back just enough to see the spell he’d just cast flicker weakly, tugging at his chi in an effort to maintain itself. Then, as if someone had blown a puff of air over ash in a dying fire pit, the spell vanished. No.

“It hurts.”

In, hold, out. Li pressed his lips together and sat up straight.

“You aren’t a Woman in White,” he said.

“Am I not?”

Spirits, her voice was soothing. Li wanted to listen.

“Maybe you were once,” he said, shivering as something ghosted over his shoulders. He couldn’t look at her. “But you aren’t now.”

She hummed and what felt like a fingernail trailed down the back of Li’s neck to his spine. “And what am I now?” she murmured right next to his ear.

“I…” He didn’t know. He didn’t know. He couldn’t name her. He couldn’t bind her. He had no power over her.

“It hurts,” she whispered. A feather light touch brushed the front of his tunic, just over the burn scar that ended the life he once lived and started this one. “Here. Rejection by one you love is never easy.”

No. No it wasn’t.

“This isn’t the first time you’ve been rejected.”

How did she know? How did she know?

“I can feel it. It eats you alive knowing someone hates you so much.” Her lips brushed the sensitive skin just behind his ear and Li was slipping. He knew he was slipping. But she was right.

“You can’t have me,” he breathed. “I’m not unfaithful.”

Laughter, light and dangerous. “Aren’t you?”

He swallowed back his nerves. “It’s hard to be unfaithful to someone who was never faithful to you in the first place,” he said.

The wandering touches, as light as a summer breeze but deadly as a razor edge, paused in their ministrations. “True enough.”

There was pain there. Li could hear it in her voice.

“To be betrayed by one you love…” She sighed and warm air puffed by his neck in a heavy, sorrowful sigh. “Once is the fatal wound. Twice is the twist of the blade.”

“Someone betrayed you,” Li said, refusing to glance over his shoulder. He wanted to, but every instinct warned him it would be the last thing he ever did. “Who was it?”

She hummed and rested her head against Li’s back between his shoulder blades. He could feel her
weight. “Men. Who else?”

“Men. More than one?” Li pressed, keeping his voice calm and controlled.

Soft hair teased his shirt sleeve as she shifted against his back. “Do you think I’m pretty?” she whispered.

What?

“Why ask me that?” Why? Such a strange question. He couldn’t even see her. Do. Not. Look.

He felt her shrug and loop her ice cold arms around his shoulders so her fingers pressed against his chest, just shy of the burn scar over his heart.

“You’re warm,” she murmured, snuggling closer. “Am I warm?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Most people feel cool to me.”

“Am I pretty?” she asked again.

Li huffed a humorless laugh and tilted his head back so he could see the stars in the moonless night. He felt the back of his head touch hers and a tear escaped his control. “What do I know about beauty,” he said, a dry smile tugging at his lips. “Half of my face is melted off.”

He felt the Spirit pressing against him tense in surprise. One of her hands slid up his chest and he fought back a shiver. Her icy fingertips left a trail of goose-pig flesh in their wake as they touched his right cheek, then his left, and stopped. Hesitantly, with the tenderness of a lover, the Spirit’s fingers pressed gently against the burned skin, feeling along the edge of the scar then following the whorls and ridges of the burnt skin.

“This was done by someone you love.” It wasn’t a question. She knew, and so did Li. “Who was it?”

Li swallowed. “I don’t know. I don’t… remember.”

“You’re lucky.” Her fingernails teased the reddened flesh that was once a whole ear. “I’m sorry.”

His chest felt heavy, laden with a pain of guilt, failure, and love for one he couldn’t even remember. “Me too.”

“Some people say I’m beautiful,” she said. “They’re lying. I know. I always know. I hate liars.”

The stars were so bright tonight. Bright and clear and… not the ones he felt like he should be seeing. It was getting hard to keep his thoughts clear.

“So do I.” A breathless laugh escaped before he could stop it. “Jet always says I suck at lying.”

“Jet.”

Li’s nerves froze. He slipped.

“He’s the one who rejected you.” Her finger tapped his scar making his skin crawl. “You can tell me,” she whispered, perhaps sensing his mounting fear. “I promise not to tell anyone else.”

“I… He said he liked me,” Li breathed.
“Liked. Past tense.”

“I did something that… disturbed him,” Li admitted. “Told him something. He wasn’t expecting it.”

“So he rejected you.”

Yes.

“He betrayed your trust.”

...yes… But-

“Do you think he’d think me pretty?” she asked.

“Probably,” Li replied. “He told me I was pretty. Even with my face… like this.”

He felt her move again and his body was cold where she touched.

“How did you find out?” Li asked, tilting his head to hear her reply. “That your lover was cheating on you, I mean.”

Her grip on him tightened. “Why do you ask?”

In, hold, out. “I can only imagine how much it must have hurt to find out,” Li said softly.

She nodded. “He told me I was beautiful,” she said.

Ah. So that’s why.

“He said I was the most beautiful person he had ever seen.” Her voice was melodic, dreamy, soothing Li’s frayed nerves. He could hear her smile as if remembering a fond memory. “I wonder how many women he told that to.”

Why was she still here?

“You said you were betrayed twice,” Li said hesitantly.

She hummed an affirmative. “I trusted them.” Her grip tightened. “And they betrayed me. He told me I was beautiful. Then they ruined me.”


He couldn’t move.

“Do you think I’m pretty?” she asked.

Don’t answer that.

“Do you think I’m pretty?” he asked instead.

The Spirit was silent as if confused by his response. Then “You’re warm,” she whispered. “Too warm.”

Li tensed, slipping one of his hands into his tunic pocket, praying to Agni that he grabbed the right spell. It wasn’t powerful and it wasn’t the spell he needed, but it was the best option he had right now.
“There was heat here before,” she said, her fingernails on his chest beginning to dig into his skin painfully. “Like sunlight.”

Li couldn’t look down to be sure he had the right one. He could only pray it was. He breathed in, held it, then breathed out and felt the paper stiffen with his chi.

“You feel like sunlight.”

“I wonder why?” Li said. He touched the hand on his chest with the paper spell.

“You’re Fire,” she hissed. The spell burst into flame and the Spirit’s touch vanished in a high-pitched scream leaving him gasping and shivering and alone. The banishment was temporary. It wouldn’t last very long at all, just long enough for him to get out of here. But first, he pulled out the last copy of the protection spell he had, breathed his chi into the fibers, and prayed to Agni. He poured more chi into this spell than he had his two previous attempts.

This one had to hold.

The paper burned away leaving the scorched words on the stone bridge once more. He breathed and felt his heart tremble. He was so cold. It was like his body heat had been ripped away from him. He placed his hands on the ground and felt the heat there, built up from the sunlight during the day. Shaking from the bone chilling cold, Li drew the heat out of the ground and into himself, warming his blood and returning feeling to his fingers and toes.

He hadn’t realized he’d closed his eyes until he opened them again. The ground by his hands was frosted over. Delicate crystals fringed the grass blades and nipped the nearest buds. Thin wisps of frost squeezed out from a few of the thicker stalks of grass like silky ribbons. He dared not touch them for fear they would melt on contact. They were already melting even as he watched.

He did this. He had taken away the heat from the earth, freezing the water within the plants until frost flowers bloomed from the moisture that remained. This was firebending. It was... beautiful.
Observe

Chapter Summary

In which Tengfei sees something he never thought possible and tries to come to terms with it.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Don't worry about missing Jet and Li's reunion. That'll be next. I know what I'm doing. ...sometimes...

“What was that?”

He couldn’t answer.

“Sir, what was that?”

He shook his head, still trying to process what he’d seen. “I don’t know,” he replied.

His green eyes were wide and staring at the place where the Woman in White had been mere seconds before. He’d seen the tell-tale flash of flame right before the Spirit shrieked and vanished. Firebender. Li had used fire against the Spirit and it had worked.

But why was there ice by the boy’s hands? It made no sense! Li had bent fire right in front of Tengfei’s and Shanyuan’s eyes. Tengfei couldn’t cover for the boy now.

But neither Dai Li could deny the frost coating the ground by Li’s quivering hands. Only waterbenders could manipulate water and ice. Li wasn’t the Avatar. Tengfei had seen the twelve-year-old Avatar himself the day the boy and his group of friends first arrived in Ba Sing Se. Li was a firebender. Those eyes, the scorch marks he’d left on the chair he’d clutched during his fit in the library, the tongues of flame he’d summoned to banish the Woman in White’s Spirit all screamed that loud and clear.

And yet there was ice on a warm, mid Spring night just past sunset. Ice that both Tenfei and Shanyuan had witnessed appear from nothing with their own eyes. How…

Thermal shock.

Tengfei leaned back from his perch in the tree branches, balancing carefully on his bare feet. He wasn’t fond of hiding in trees. He couldn’t feel the comforting firmness of dirt and stone beneath his feet and earth shoes. He craved that sturdy support in times like this when he was forced to question what he’d seen and heard.

Thermal shock. That’s no doubt what had weakened the stone in the potter’s kiln this morning. From the moment Shanyuan had pointed it out, Tengfei knew he was right. But how could a
firebender cool down a blazing hot active kiln? Firebenders controlled fire, not ice.

How, by Yu Huang’s jade throne, had Li bent ice?!

“There’s a barrier up,” Shanyuan murmured, glancing around them warily.

Tengfei nodded. He could feel it. It was warm and comforting and safe like sunlight on a midsummer’s day. Li, that headache-inducing brilliant boy. How did he do this?

“It’s not that strong,” Tengfei said, nodding to his younger partner. “Add your prayers to it and hang a charm here to reinforce it. That thing nearly took another victim.”

Shanyuan nodded and withdrew a small string of beads from his belt and looped it around a tree branch by his face. Tengfei listened closely to his partner’s prayer: short, quick, and to-the-point. Good. Long, drawn out prayers did the same thing a short, quick prayer did. The time and effort used to fancify the basics could and should be spent elsewhere. Everyone knew that.

So did Li, apparently. The time it took the boy to scramble away from the vanished Spirit to the bridge’s side where he’d bent his second flame had been all of five seconds, perhaps six. That was a good time for an experienced Dai Li and a fantastic time for a boy with little to no formal training.

This was beyond Tengfei. He couldn’t keep covering for the boy alone. Not now. Not without something that Shanyuan would believe.

And where was that Knowledge Seeker? The fox Spirit was nowhere to be seen. Maybe that was why the Woman in White decided to strike now, when Li was alone and without a Spirit companion to watch his back. But Women in White preyed on adulterers and cheaters. Had Li…

“Sir.”

Rocking back on his heels so he leaned closer to the tree trunk, Tengfei tilted his head to his partner.

“Don’t you find this odd?” Shanyuan asked, the uncertainty audible in his voice. “Do Spirits normally attack the same person twice in one day?”

“Not usually no,” Tengfei said. “But I’m not so sure the attack at the potter’s complex this morning was aimed at Li specifically. Or if that was only Spirits involved.”

“Li, sir?”

Tengfei didn’t have to look to know Shanyuan’s light brown eyes were looking at him warily. He would have to choose his next words with care.

“Apparently the boy has garnered a bit of a reputation in the Lower Ring,” he said, letting his partner’s suspicion roll off his shoulders like rain off a turkey-duck’s back. “The boy works at Pao’s Family Tea House with the fox.”

It was hard not to sigh in relief when his partner nodded. That little tea shop had been gaining popularity even up here in the Middle Ring. The Dai Li had been keeping an eye on the merchant Quon’s business connections just in case any were… dangerous to the security of Ba Sing Se. When the Dai Li learned a student at the university had ordered tea and an assortment of items for a traditional tea ceremony from a time before the… rumored disturbances beyond the Outer Wall for the Anthropology Department’s assessment display tonight, they had sent agents to keep an eye
Tengfei could only imagine the headache those agents had gotten when they reported the Avatar and his gang had showed up. The Joo Dee assigned to them should have kept them away from there. At least the Avatar’s earthbender had reappeared. How odd that she had shown up at the exact same time Quon’s delivery boy had arrived at the university with the tea ceremony equipment. The girl had even been reported to be traveling with the delivery boy and his friend.

Two guesses who that delivery boy and his friend had been.

“Sir?”

This time, Tengfei did turn to his partner. Shanyuan’s eyes gleamed in the darkness. The young Dai Li grimaced.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Shanyuan gazed at Tengfei with wide eyes, demanding a straight answer. “I’m your partner. Whatever you know, I need to know too.”

Solid logic. And damn if Tengfei didn’t agree with it.

“I met the boy a few days ago in the library,” Tengfei said. “I was off duty at the time and he was having a fit. His friend was trying to snap him out of it, but it wasn’t working.” Here’s the fun part. “The Knowledge Seeker was with him and demanded I help him. She is… attached to him.”

“Why didn’t you report this?!” the young Dai Li demanded.

“Two reasons,” Tengfei said, holding up two fingers. “One,” he lowered one finger, “I was off duty and I don’t get days off as often as I would prefer. Second,” he lowered the second finger, “nothing suspicious happened.” Per se.

Shanyuan balked. “Nothing sus- There was a Spirit there!”

“A Knowledge Seeker was in the library,” Tengfei said calmly and succinctly. “If a Knowledge Seeker is ever going to be seen, it would be in there. They are seen there on occasion. Not often, granted, but it does happen. The professors are aware of them and some of the veteran students see them every now and then. They’re generally harmless unless provoked and tend to avoid human contact unless they have no other choice. We leave them alone and they leave us alone.”

He purposefully met his young partner’s eyes. “Remember your training, Agent Shanyuan,” he said, watching his partner stiffen. “Who is the head of the Knowledge Seekers’ house?”

“Wan Shi Tong,” Shanyuan answered immediately by rote memory.

Tengfei nodded. “And who has no quarrel with Ba Sing Se so long as we do not infringe on his house?” he pressed patiently. This was both a learning moment and something that needed to be made clear. No one wanted to involve a Spirit as powerful and influential as Wan Shi Tong in official business.

“Wan Shi Tong,” Shanyuan said in a quieter, shyer voice ducking his head slightly in embarrassment.

“Well done.” Tengfei allowed himself a small, proud smile. His partner may be young, but he was quick to learn. “I’m not upset,” he added, nudging Shanyuan with his elbow in such a way that his partner knew it was deliberate. “This is something you need to know. Most Dai Li don’t like to talk about it because it’s one of our… less than impressive moments.”
Shanyuan perked up a bit in interest and Tengfei mentally patted himself on the back for the effective distraction. Even if it was both true and slightly embarrassing for his fellow agents. Long Feng was still puzzling over the whole incident which was one of the reasons why the Avatar and his gang’s constant mischief was driving their leader up the wall and back.

“I’m sure you were wondering why we had a few agents keep an eye on the Anthropology Department’s events tonight,” Tengfei said, returning his gaze to Li who had picked himself up and- Well, well, there was Jet and the Knowledge Seeker. Strange. Why were they separated to begin with?

“I… did find it a bit unusual,” Shanyuan admitted reluctantly, as if afraid to admit it.

“There used to be a professor there by the name of Zei,” Tengfei explained. “He was popular with the students. He would often have hands-on opportunities for the younger children and did his best to make history come alive for his classes. He was interesting to listen to. I and many other Dai Li would sit in on a class or two. There was just one problem.” Tengfei glanced at his partner. “His speciality was ancient civilizations, from all over the world.”

Tengfei lifted an eyebrow and Shanyuan’s eyes widened in understanding. “You mean he studied the Fi-” He cleared his throat. “-the…” he waved his hand vaguely.

Tengfei let his partner struggle for a moment before chuckling and easing the tension. “He did, yes. So you can understand why we had no choice but to keep an eye on him,” he said, returning his gaze to Li and Jet.

Ah, it seemed the Knowledge Seeker had noticed their presence. He would have to finish this quickly.

“He went a little too far one day during a class he was teaching,” Tengfei explained. “When the class was over, we waited until he was alone. But he vanished.” He huffed in remembered frustration. “We still don’t know how he slipped away from us. It’s… never easy to report a failure to Long Feng. You would do well to remember that, Shanyuan. Our venerable leader has sharp nails.”

Shanyuan blinked in confusion, then his brown eyes noticed the thin scar tracing a narrow track from just below Tengfei’s right eye to his jawline and blanched. Tengfei didn’t react, he didn’t have to.

“Yes sir,” his partner said, turning to Li and Jet still stood. Brown eyes flickered to Tengfei awkwardly. “Thank you. I’m sorry.”

Tengfei patted the young Dai Li’s back. “Not your fault,” he said, standing from his crouch. “Wait here,” Tengfei said a second before he dropped to the ground beneath the tree and approached the still shaking boys. “You seem to have bad luck with Spirits, Li,” he said loudly enough to give the boys a chance to notice and react to his presence.

Li flinched, stepping back towards the bridge. Interestingly, Jet didn’t jump to Li’s defense like Tengfei expected him to. So something had happened between them. Not good.

“You’re Dai Li,” Jet growled, his hands twitching by his belt. A swordsman apparently.

“I am,” Tengfei answered with an easy nod. “And you can relax. If I was going to vanish you, you wouldn’t see me coming.”

Jet visibly bristled, but Li surprisingly relaxed. Tengfei hoped his partner was paying attention.
There was much to learn here.

“You were at the…” Li licked his lips and stepped forward so he stood shoulder to shoulder with Jet. He held out his arms for the Knowledge Seeker to hop up and scramble onto his shoulders in a smooth, well-practiced motion. How long had those two been together? “You were there this morning,” Li tried again.

Tengfei nodded. “I was,” he agreed. “The kiln suffered from something called thermal shock. It happens when something that is very cold is suddenly heated very fast. Or,” he tilted his head down so his hat shaded his eyes from the pagoda’s green glow, “when something very hot is suddenly cooled very quickly. The stone walls were cracked and the pottery inside was shattered.”

Li said nothing, but the dawning fear in his pale gold eyes -Fire Nation eyes- said everything Li wouldn’t verbalize. Did the boy know how expressive he was?

“How did you do it?” Tengfei asked simply.

The Knowledge Seeker wrapped her four tails -four? Didn’t she have three last time Tengfei saw her?- around Li’s neck and gazed sightlessly at him. He knew she knew about Shanyuan still hiding in the nearby tree. But that didn’t mean Li knew. Better the boy thought Tengfei was alone, for now.

Speaking of, Tengfei noticed the shy glance Li shot Jet. Ah. So Li may have told Jet about his fiery disposition. Judging by the fact Li had been alone when the Woman in White preyed on him, Jet hadn’t taken the news very well.

And yet Jet was here now.

“We’ve bolstered your spell,” Tengfei said, directing his words to Li and studying the boy’s reaction. All the blood drained from Li’s face but Tengfei continued. “It should hold until morning. Although, I have to ask, what did you do to make the Woman in White leave? I’ve never seen a spell like that before.”

“Woman in-” Jet’s eyes narrowed and he whirled on Li in shock. “You didn’t tell me she was here again!”

Even the Knowledge Seeker appeared displeased with this bit of news.

“She was,” Tengfei said. “And you banished her.” He nodded in acknowledgement of an accomplishment. “That was impressive. I would watch your step though. Spirits like that tend to be vindictive when they’re offended.”

Li winced. “I know,” he murmured. His gaze dropped hesitantly. “I gave her Jet’s name.”

Damn. “You slipped,” Tengfei said, ignoring Jet’s shell-shocked expression. “Jet, I suggest you stay clear of this area for a while and do your best to never be alone.”

“You gave…” Jet murmured, staring at Li with hurt brown eyes. “Why?”

“It wasn’t his fault,” Tengfei said quickly. “Women in White can be persuasive. More often than not, they don’t directly kill their victims. They convince their victims to kill themselves. If you hadn’t banished her when you did…”

Li nodded in understanding and Jet looked like he was going to be sick. Good. If the Woman in White saw Li as a viable victim, then something must have happened.
“She isn’t a Woman in White,” Li said.

And Tengfei’s world tilted. “What?” he breathed, aware of the fact that his shock was visible on his face but unable to hide it. “What do you mean?”

“She’s not a Woman in White,” Li repeated and no, that still didn’t make sense.

“Explain,” Tengfei demanded.

“I don’t know how,” Li said, shaking his head. “I thought she was a Woman in White too and she may have been originally but she isn’t anymore. Something happened to her. She’s changed.”

That made no sense. Spirits didn’t change. Their very nature was to endure, to be what they were for as long as they existed. For a Spirit to change-

“Wan Shi Tong said this was happening,” Li said. The Knowledge Seeker on his shoulder dipped her head and swished her tails in confirmation. “They’re being affected by malice in unusual ways. She isn’t a Woman in White. Neither of us were unfaithful and she still tried to… entice me.”

Goodness, was that a blush?

The soft sound of earth shoes hitting the ground was not the best thing Tengfei had heard all night, but he supposed he should have expected it. He could only keep his partner out of this for so long. Shanyuan stepped up so he stood next to Tengfei with his hands tucked into his sleeves, keeping the iron link chains ready to use but hidden from sight.

“Are you a waterbender?” Shanyuan demanded.

Tengfei sighed internally. Young people were so blunt these days. ...Great. He just aged himself.

Li was positively speechless and Jet looked like he was going to lay an egg like a platypus-bear. Whatever you two boys do, do not-

Jet threw his head back and laughed loud, clapping his hands helplessly in amusement. Li looked like he couldn’t decide whether to smack Jet upside the head or sink into the ground.

...laugh. Tengfei groaned.

“He… He thinks…” and Jet was gone again.

Shanyuan looked thoroughly confused and the beginnings of a blush was beginning to show on his cheeks in the dim green light from the pagoda. Best to salvage this situation while he had the chance.

“You pulled the heat from the kiln too quickly resulting in thermal shock,” Tengfei said, listening to Jet’s laughter fade away to wary silence. “I can see why you fled then. It wasn’t a pleasant sight.” Shanyuan shifted next to Tengfei in discomfort at the memory of the mostly cremated bodies. “However, because of your quick thinking, we were able to recover the children’s remains and bury them in proper Earth Kingdom custom.” He bowed and Shanyuan hurried to copy his motions. “For that, I thank you. No child deserves a fate like the unburied.”

Li looked away and Tengfei wanted to know why. But not now. There was a time and place for these things and now was neither.

“The last train to the Lower Ring leaves soon,” he said. “I suggest you be on it before this area
Jet caught on and grabbed Li’s arm, tugging the scarred boy away as quickly as he could.

“You didn’t ask him about the flames,” Shanyuan said grimly, watching Li and Jet leave.

The Knowledge Seeker looked back at them and Tengfei nodded minutely. The fox Spirit turned away and Tengfei breathed a sigh of relief.

"Certain papers burn easily," Tengfei said. "Spark rocks are good to keep on hand."


Tengfei gave his partner his best befuddled expression. "You don't carry spark rocks with you?" he asked in feigned mild surprise. Shanyuan shook his head. "You should," Tengfei said. "Many Spirits aren't fond of Fire for... obvious reasons." He patted his belt significantly. "I have a pair with me often when I work the night watch."

Shanyuan nodded with less doubt this time and Tengfei quickly changed the topic.

“I’m more interested in Li’s thoughts on the Woman in White,” he said, dropping his gaze to the frosted ground where Li had been standing. He knelt to brush his fingertips lightly against a melting frost flower. “If this Spirit isn’t a Woman in White anymore, then that means her selection of prey has also changed.” He sighed, feeling another headache come on. “Which means we’ll have to adjust our protections yet again.”

“But if she isn’t a Woman in White,” Shanyuan murmured to himself, “then what is she?”

Tengfei frowned. “I don’t know,” he admitted.

And that’s what scared him.
In which Jet is still processing, admits to a painful memory, and promises not to give up on Li.

Tengfei was Dai Li. Tengfei was *Dai Li*. Jet was still trying to wrap his head around the idea of Li being a *firebender* and now he had to contend with Tengfei, the weird guy who ignored him in the university library, was a Spirits-mad *Dai Li!* ...which actually made sense in a twisted sort of way. *But still!*

Jet hopped on the first outbound train that arrived at the station, tugging a struggling Li on board with him. The car was mostly empty except for a middle aged woman who looked like she worked at a Middle Ring spa and an elderly man asleep on one of the benches. Jet shuffled over to the far side of the train car.

“*Let go,* Jet!” Li hissed, yanking his arm from Jet’s tight grip and glaring and rubbing his arm gingerly. “That hurt. You didn’t have to yank me around like that.”

“Yeah, and what guarantee did I have that you wouldn’t run off again?” Jet argued.

Li balked. “You- I told you I would and you didn’t-” He licked his lips and there was hurt in those baby sparrowhawk eyes and Jet was not ready for these emotions right now. “You didn’t even *try* to stop me.”

“I did, actually,” Jet snapped. He glanced at the other passengers on the train and lowered his voice. “I did,” he said again, quieter. “I was just… I just wasn’t fast enough.”

The fox Spirit curled protectively around Li’s neck chirped, drawing Li’s attention. Something passed between those two that Jet couldn’t hear but whatever it was silenced Li. The waiter huffed and crossed his arms, turning away from Jet and glaring out the open window at the city speeding by below the elevated tracks. Jet bit back his mounting frustration and rubbed his forehead, stemming the growing headache. Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward and leaned against the other side of the window.

“I-I’m sorry,” he said. That was hard. “I just…” He glanced at Li who was avoiding his gaze and grimaced. “I did,” he said again, quieter. “I was just… I just wasn’t fast enough.”

Golden eyes locked on Jet with a vehemence Jet hardly recognized in the tea waiter. So there was a temper in that walking ball of blushing awkwardness. A Fire Nation temper. Good to know.

“What I’m trying to say,” Jet said, enunciating each word to emphasize his mounting frustration, “is that…” He sighed and let his head thunk back against the stone wall of the train and gestured
vaguely in surrender. “I don’t know what I’m trying to say.” He rubbed his head in exasperation. “I just…” He clasped his hands in front of his face as if in prayer and focused on controlling his temper. “You can’t just *spring* something like that on me and not expect me to have a little *trouble* accepting it.”

In the corner of his eye, Jet could see the faint flush of color bloom in Li’s cheeks. “I wasn’t exactly planning on springing it on you at all,” he grumbled just barely loud enough to hear.

That wasn’t any better!

“Were you ever going to tell me?” Jet asked, looking directly at Li. The guilty way the waiter looked away was as clear an answer as any. It hurt. “You suck at lying, Li,” he said, letting his head thunk dully against the stone. “Do you really think you could have kept something like that a secret from me forever?”

Li shrugged shyly and avoided Jet’s gaze. “I could have.”

“Case in point,” Jet said, tilting his head Li’s way. “You’re lying.”

“I am not.”

Jet just chuckled instead of pressing his point. “Whatever. Let’s say that, by some miracle, you could keep that from me.” He rolled his head to look at Li. “Could you have kept that a secret if I ended up fucking you?”

The sound Li made could barely be called Human. It actually sounded like one of Zenko’s numerous vocalizations. Li’s face was bright red and his good eye looked like it was going to bug right out of his face and he was shaking like a dry autumn leaf in the wind. So predictable.

“W-What’s *that* got to do with anything?” Li cried, immediately slapping a hand over his mouth when his voice bounced up an octave. “And anyway, what makes you think I’d *let* you fuck me?” he hissed when the other two people in the train shot him a mildly annoyed look.

Jet huffed a laugh. “Because I’m a sly coyote-fox and I have a way with sexy people,” he teased.

This was way too easy. Li was a firebender. But he was also still Li. He still stuttered and blushed and shook and stumbled over emotions. It was such an unreal juxtaposition that it was threatening to break Jet’s mind in half. The humor drained out of him leaving him strangely exhausted. He hung his head and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“They- The Fire Nation, I mean,” he said in a voice that was smaller than he meant it to be, “they took everything from me. Everything.”

He really didn’t want to think about this. But Li had to understand this. Jet had to make him understand.

“We weren’t doing anything,” he said, wishing he still had his straw. He needed something to fiddle with. “Our village was small. We all knew each other. Nothing interesting happened.” Deep breath. “Then one day, this band of Fire Nation mercenaries came. They just…” he waved his hand, letting it slap his leg limply, “burned *everything*. I watched my parents burn alive when the house fell on them. They were this close,” he held up his hand so his first finger and thumb were a centimeter apart, “this close to getting out. But one of those Fire Nation bastards hit the last support beam with a fire blast and it just…” He thrust his hand to the floor and pursed his lips. “And that was it.”
He hated talking about this. With Katara it had been a manipulation, half serious because she was *cute*. But now, with Li, it was harder to share. It *felt* harder. It hurt more. He felt like he was choking. He took a deep breath and forced it all out through his nose.

“I survived,” he said grimly. “A few other kids did too, but not many. None of the adults did.”

He really needed something to fiddle with. Li was so silent.

“My dad helped me build this kickass treehouse before…” He swallowed and why was his throat so raw all of a sudden? “So I hid there for a while. I used some of the wood I could *fitch* from the village, anything that wasn’t burned to *ash*,” he hissed, “and kept adding to it. Then kids started coming and I let them live with me as long as they helped me build the treehouse. They came from all over and they all had these skills.”

He shook his head and smiled at the memory. “This one kid, Thistle,” he clicked his tongue, “she could tie knots like nobody’s business. Her family used to be fishermen before the Fire Nation attacked her family’s shipping town. The Duke is a little bundle of energy who has a thing for smacking people in the shins. He’s always with Pipsqueak who’s five foot ten easy and can bench press two barrels of blasting jelly.”

His grin faded. “We were a family,” he whispered. “My new family. Smellerbee was my best spy. She can climb a pole with her bare hands and stab you where it matters and you’d never see her coming. Longshot was my right hand guy. Best archer you ever saw.” He sighed. “We lived in our treehouse city and we ruled that forest. It was *our* home and the Fire Nation could never catch any of us. And they tried. They tried,” he murmured, nodding. “But we stuck together. We survived.”

He took a deep breath and covered his face with one hand. “Then the Avatar came,” he said. “I found out he and his girl, that girl from earlier, were waterbenders. So I asked them to help me out with something.” He shifted uncomfortably. “See, there was this village near our forest where a bunch of Fire Nation soldiers were staying. It made me furious. That town was okay. It wasn’t burned down. The Fire Nation was *there* and the village wasn’t burned down.”

He ran a hand through his messy hair and sighed. “I hated it. It wasn’t fair. So,” he dropped his hand wearily, “I decided they had to die. It was only fair. I tricked the Avatar and his girl into bending the water just right to fill up the reservoir behind a dam up the river from the village. Smellerbee and my-” he gulped, “-my Freedom Fighters planted boxes of blasting jelly at strategic points on the dam supports. Then, on my signal, Longshot fired a flaming arrow and the dam blew. The river flooded.”

He laughed. It wasn’t funny, but he laughed. “I had them. I had the Avatar and the waterbender on my side,” he whispered. “But not her brother. He never trusted me. And he was right.” Jet nodded weakly. “He was right. When Aang and Katara figured out my plan, they tried to stop me but they were too late. The dam blew, the river flooded, and the town was wiped out.”

He looked away from Li. He didn’t want to see the judgement and hatred on the face of the boy who cried over two dead children.

“Or, I thought it was,” he amended a moment later. “Turns out Katara’s brother had warned the village and gotten everyone out to safety in time. He told the Fire Nation soldiers and they helped evacuate the entire village. The Fire Nation helped save Earth Kingdom citizens. It wasn’t *fair*!” he hissed. “Why?! They were Fire Nation. All the Fire Nation ever does is kill and burn and destroy. Why did they save those people? Why save them and not my village? My family? My- My *parents*?” Damn it, his eyes burned. “Why did I have to lose everything that mattered to me and *they* got to live happily?”
Fuck this shit. Jet’s stomach felt empty and his eyes burned and his throat was raw and he couldn’t breathe right. What the hell?

He felt the heat before arms slipped around his shoulders. Li didn’t say anything, which was probably for the best. Jet didn’t want to hear any platitudes. He wanted to vent.

“They kicked me out after that,” he whispered. He couldn’t find the energy to force sound past his lips. It was too much effort. “My Freedom Fighters, my family, they kicked me out. The ones who didn’t leave, that is. Smellerbee and Longshot came with me. We were hoping to start over here, just the three of us. But damn it I fucking hate this place.”

The arms around him tensed in surprise and Jet reached up to grip the pale hands clasped over his collarbone, keeping them there. “I hate this city, I hate all these people, I hate the noise, I just hate it.” He spat out the window at the dim city speeding past. “There are so few trees in the Lower Ring. I have to get up on the roof half the time just to fall asleep. It’s too quiet at night and too loud during the day. It’s not—”

“Home.”

The arms around him tightened and Jet ducked his head to drop a light kiss on Li’s hands. Neither of them spoke the rest of the train ride. Movement to Jet’s left caught his eye and Zenko perched on the window ledge, curling her tails around her paws daintily. She cocked her head curiously, her sightless eyes studying Jet with newfound interest. But she did not open her eyes and speak to Jet directly. She just sat there and observed. Strangely, that didn’t bother Jet. It was oddly comforting.

Li didn’t let go of him either. He just stood there and held Jet from behind. He could feel Li’s forehead rest against his neck before Li turned and Jet felt a warm cheek press against his back instead.

“I’m sorry,” Li whispered as the train pulled into the station closest to their district in the Lower Ring.

Jet squeezed Li’s pale hands and huffed. “You didn’t do anything,” he said, as the train slowed down.

When the doors opened, Li released him. But instead of breaking contact completely, Li hesitantly slipped his hand into Jet’s. They walked out of the train together, Zenko trotting by their feet.

“This has been a long day,” Jet mumbled.

Li didn’t say anything but that was fine. Li wasn’t sure he was ready to do much right now except walk. ‘Bee and Longshot were probably home by now. Curfew was only another couple hours away. He could walk with Li halfway to the potter’s district, but then they’d have to separate.

This was supposed to be a date night. Jet had so many plans. All ruined. He still wanted to do them. Later. Well, mostly.

“Li?” he said as they descended the stone stairway to the city streets below. “When… You don’t have to tell me. But I’d like to know.”

He stopped in the stairwell, stepping aside for the other two passengers from the train to pass by unhindered. When they were alone again, he tried again.

“The Woman in White,” he began, keeping his eyes on Li even as he felt the waiter’s hand twitch in his, “she was with you before I- we ,” he corrected, nodding to Zenko, “got there. Are you going
to be alright?"

The hesitation before Li nodded made it clear that no, Li wouldn’t be. But Jet wasn’t going to call him on it. Yet.

“Is that why you didn’t say anything to me when Zenko and I found you by the bridge?” Jet asked.

Li nodded. “She isn’t a Woman in White,” he said hesitantly. “I don’t know what she is now, but she isn’t a Woman in White. I wasn’t unfaithful to anyone. She shouldn’t have tried to…”

“Entice you?” Jet finished, a faint smirk on his lips. He chuckled at the color in Li’s cheeks. “I don’t know why she wouldn’t. You’re a very sexy person.”

The flush darkened and Li shifted his weight. “You’re weird,” was all he said.

“Maybe,” Jet said with a careless shrug. “But then again, I’m in good company.”

Li opened his mouth to snap a retort, then shut his mouth and looked away, sulking.

“I’ll have to ask Wan Shi Tong if he knows what’s happening,” Li muttered. “Maybe he can help.”

Jet hummed and took a step closer to Li, wary of the new awkwardness between them. “Hey,” he whispered, placing his fingers under Li’s chin and tilting the waiter’s head up so they were eye to eye. “One thing at a time.” He smiled but it wasn’t as broad or as bright as his usual smiles. “I’m still interested, you know. In you,” he added when Li blinked at him in confusion. “I can wait a while, if you want. I might sleep on your roof though.”

Li snickered, startling a smile out of both of them. “Creeper.”

Jet scoffed. “Says the spellcasting weirdo who serves tea for a living,” Jet snarked. He took a deep breath. “Wow. This isn’t going to be easy.”

“No, it won’t be,” Li agreed. “But I’m willing to try.”

Jet nodded. “Then let’s start over,” he said. “There are other nights, other things we can do.” He leaned in close, his ego growing when he noticed the way Li tilted his head as if expecting a kiss. “Besides,” he added just because he could, “you still owe me for taking you to the canal.”

Jet watched Li’s expression as the confusion cleared in remembrance than quickly faded to shock.

“You- I-” Li stuttered.

“Yeah. You and me. That’s typically how kisses work,” Jet teased, rocking just a bit closer and yes, Li was doing that head tilt again. Spirits, that was tempting. “I’m going to pin you to a wall and kiss you until you can’t breathe.”

Li sighed unevenly and Jet preened.

“But not right now,” he said, reluctantly leaning back. “I’m not… ready for that right now. I don’t think either of us are.” He rubbed his thumb over Li’s chin. “But soon. I promise.” He pecked the waiter’s lips lightly, immensely pleased when Li’s lips moved briefly with his own, before leaning back and breaking the kiss. “In the meantime,” he said, “do you mind if I walk you home?”

Li shook his head and took the lead. More than once, Jet caught himself staring at Li’s bottom. He could feel the heat from Li’s hand around his own. How had he never noticed how warm Li was all the time? Firebenders must run warmer than other people. This wasn’t going to be easy.
But it would be worth it. Jet would make sure of that. He caught sight of Zenko trotting next to Li’s feet and smirked. Besides, he’d already helped the little fox Spirit gain a new tail. He wasn’t exactly sure what that meant, but it had apparently been important enough to thoroughly distract the fox Spirit, delaying them from tracking down Li earlier. Maybe he’d get to find out why that happened too.
Will-O-The-Wisp

Chapter Summary

In which Zenko prepares for another nocturnal journey, gives her word to a worried mother, and speaks with the head of her house.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Finally, a chapter with Zenko's point of view. I figured it was about time I explained how Li is able to visit Wan Shi Tong almost every night. In short, it's a form of Spirit-enhanced astral projection. Astral projection is considered a form of energybending. Canonically, only Korra was able to figure out how to do it using energybending in the Legend of Korra series. However, this is nowhere near as powerful as her astral projection was.

Li can only project himself as far as he does with Zenko's aid. Without her aid, he would only appear as a hitodama or will-o-the-wisp (thus the chapter title), and be unable to travel/project himself very far from his body for very long. He's also completely clueless about how he does this. He honestly still believes he visits Wan Shi Tong in a dream for now. He's not really wrong...

Humans were such strange, complex creatures. She had never really had much of an interest in them before Li came to her rescue in the Si Wong Desert. She had been in the process of returning to the library on Wan Shi Tong’s request when she’d made the mistake of passing too close to the buzzard-hornet’s hive. Someone must have angered them earlier during the day because they came after her enforce.

She’d only had two tails then. She had been alive for longer than the average human lifespan, but her power was limited by her two tails. She’d fought viciously, but when one of those creatures had snatched her hoshi no tama, her precious starball, she’d pounced. That creature hadn’t lived through the night, but her leg had paid the price.

Then in came the Human. Li hadn’t asked her for anything. He’d simply slashed the buzzard-hornets until they’d left. Then, when he’d found her starball, he hadn’t kept it, taunting her with it hoping to draw out some kind of promise or deal from her. He’d just given it back to her.

He had no idea how much that meant to her. Li rarely brought it up. He sometimes gazed at it when she played with it, but never made any move to touch it or take it. As far as Li was concerned, the starball was hers and he wouldn’t do anything to it without her expressed permission.

It was strange and did not match what she knew of Humans. When she learned Li had no memories and only wanted to know, to learn, she stayed and earned herself a new tail. The longer she stayed, the more she wanted to learn about Humans, about Li. He intrigued her. Even Ying and Than and
the tiny new Human Hope captured her interest.

She had seen tiny Humans before but they were generally useless and of no interest to her. But now, seeing the tiny Human with her mother and father and Li, she was beginning to understand. Tiny Humans were born knowing nothing. They had to learn as they grew. Just like her brothers and sisters in Wan Shi Tong’s house.

Now she had another tail! Two brand new fluffy tails in a month. Zenko could barely contain her excitement. Her family would never believe their eyes. She was so proud of herself. Wan Shi Tong would be impressed. Just the thought of that made her fluff up with pride. But she would have to wait until Li slept before she could see the head of her house.

Sleep. Such an odd thing. Only physical beings required it. It puzzled her. Why would anyone stop learning new things just to spend most of the dark hours unconscious and unaware of the waking world? She knew sleep was a requirement and she knew why, but that didn’t change her confusion. The unconscious mind was vulnerable, unguarded, and open to manipulation. No Spirit required sleep, not even her.

And yet, it was… comfortable. She had found that she liked sleeping. She could never allow herself to sleep for very long. But the short naps she took made her feel refreshed. It was strange and fascinating.

But there would be no sleeping tonight, not for her. She would let Li rest as well before helping him to Wan Shi Tong’s library once more. The boy was a fast learner. He could almost manage the trip by himself now. It was an impressive feat.

She waited, curled on the old futon next to the tiny Human’s crib. Li had spent the past hour telling Than and Ying about his day. The Human woman had pulled Li to her breast and held him there, rocking him as tears slipped from the boy’s eyes. Than sat down next to her wearing his nightclothes and sighed.

“Thank you, Zenko,” he whispered.

Zenko twitched her ears so he knew she was listening.

“For being there when Li needed you,” he clarified. “Thank you.”

She hadn’t been, though. She growled in the back of her throat. She hadn’t been there when the Spirit that had once been a Woman in White had attacked Li. Worse still, Li hadn’t told her. The Dai Li had. It irked her. She buried her nose shamefully in her brand new tail and huffed in annoyance.

“You have four tails now?” Than asked in surprise.

She moved her head so she could see the Human’s spirit more clearly. His smile was warm and pleasing to her senses, and so was his hand when he pet her head. She smiled and warbled in pleasure earning her a chuckle from the male Human. It would never cease to amuse her how much Humans liked the sounds she made.

“Four tails?” Li said, sitting up from Ying’s embrace and staring at Zenko in shock. She watched as his glowing red spirit studied her form, counting her tails. She wagged her newest tail to draw attention to it. Li immediately crawled over to her and ran his hand over her new fur, a steady flow of praise pouring from his mouth. Just the way she liked it.

“It doesn’t smell either.”
Hmph! Zenko jerked her tail from Li’s grasp, stood, and deliberately curled in a ball looking away from the boy. Smelly. Stinky. Indeed! And now Li was frantically apologizing and hovering in confusion while Than and Ying laughed. Ying ran a hand over Zenko’s head, scratching one of her ears gently before going to bed.

Zenko remained where she was until Li finally gave up trying to apologize and lay on the futon next to Zenko. She could feel his warm flame burning close to her side but refused to acknowledge him. She could practically feel that red-orange flame of Li’s spirit dim at the rejection.

Only when Li’s spirit finally dimmed to the dull embers of sleep, did she shift her body so her fur pressed against Li’s chin and chest. She rested her chin on Li’s vulnerable neck and pressed close to him, feeling the steady pulse under her fur and listening to the boy’s slow, deep breaths. She would wait until Li’s spirit loosened its hold on him before drawing him out and away to Wan Shi Tong’s library once more.

But yet again, Li surprised her. His spirit began loosening the bonds holding it bound to his flesh on his own much sooner than she expected. She opened her eyes and watched the details of Li’s spirit become sharper and clearer. The boy was pure Fire and he burned. She had been serious when she told him he burned brightly. Li was a torch to her sight. He could no more hide who and what he was than a badger-mole could masquerade as a pygmy puma.

She waited until Li’s spirit wriggled just enough to escape the web of flesh and slip out into the physical world. So vulnerable. She made a soothing sound she knew Li’s spirit would recognize and waited for the small red-orange hitodama to approach her like it always did. She flicked her tongue out, her starball balanced on the tip, and tossed the small marble that was her very being playfully into the air.

She would never tire of watching Li’s small, vulnerable, disembodied spirit try frantically to catch her starball before it could crash back into the floor. As if she would let something like that happen. Nevertheless, his concern for her well-being, even in a state he would never consciously remember, warmed her heart. She caught her starball with her newest tail with a practiced ease from decades of experience. Li’s spirit ball whirled in the air before latching onto her softly glowing starball.

She rolled her starball around her tail, warbling softly deep in her throat as Li’s hitodama gave chase. She wanted to be sure Li’s spirit was disconnected enough from his body that the distance between Ba Sing Se and Wan Shi Tong’s library wouldn’t harm him. Besides, Li was such a worrier. Honestly, Zenko was perfectly capable of protecting her vulnerable essence.

Slowly but surely, she felt the tension drain from Li’s body, his heartbeat ease to a snail-slug’s pace, and his breathing become smooth and regular. Finally, she deemed Li ready for the trek. With the utmost care, she flipped her starball back into her mouth and let Li’s hitodama follow. Then she closed her jaws, mindful of her sharp teeth. She didn’t want to hurt her Human companion.

Soon, she wouldn’t need to do this anymore. Li was learning how to do this on his own. He may not consciously remember this process, but his subconscious did. Before long, Li would be able to make this trek on his own. Although, she considered thoughtfully, if Li ever attempted this during the day with Agni high in the sky, he would learn quicker and need less protection. But not yet.

Night was dangerous to Fire. Night was the domain of Tui and water. It was naturally opposed to Agni and fire. Both independent yet reliant on the other; such a dangerous and delicate balance. Zenko would have to accompany Li every time they did this during the night. Especially now that Li had the misfortune of attracting that malevolent, changed Spirit’s attention. She would not lose
her favorite Human companion.

“He needs rest.”

Startled, Zenko stood and turned to face the Human woman curiously. Fascinating. The woman must have been woken by something.

:He is resting.:

Ying tensed where she lay next to her husband on the other side of the low crib but her brown eyes were stern. “He needs to rest, Zenko,” she said again.

Zenko’s ear twitched in confusion. She approached Ying, dipping her head so the Human could see Li’s hitodama still caged and safe in her mouth. :He is. His body sleeps. He will be rested come morning,: Zenko said, swishing her tails.

The tiny fragile Human in the crib began to gurgle hungrily and Ying sighed, sitting up. “That may be,” she said while scooting to the crib and lifting her child to her now bare breast to feed. “But the body is not the only thing that needs rest. The mind must also rest. Someone with a tired mind is just as unhealthy as someone with a tired body. Perhaps more so.”

:Does the mind not rest during sleep?: Zenko asked, cocking her head curiously.

“It does,” Ying replied, tossing a few strands of brown hair that has escaped her night braid out of her face. “But only when allowed to. You are a Spirit. You don’t need to sleep like we do. Like Li does. If you continue to take him with you every night, his mind will never be fully rested.”

Zenko sat and pondered the Human’s words. Human bodies were fragile. Perhaps more fragile than she had originally thought. She’d watched Li practice his bending every night at Wan Shi Tong’s library and his swordsmanship every evening in that old warehouse with Jet. Well, she corrected, every evening except this past evening. After Jet dropped Li off at this apartment complex, he had left. She could still feel the sting in Li’s mind when he watched Jet’s retreating back.

Truly, Humans were an intricate puzzle. She would have to speak with the Professor about this.

:I will think on your words,: she said. :But tonight we must speak with Wan Shi Tong. It would seem Li has attracted the attention of a Spirit of ill repute. That Spirit is changing to something even I cannot identify. If I am to remain by Li’s side and keep him safe, then I must know what I am dealing with.:

Ying paled and she clutched her child close. Her brown eyes turned to Li’s still form sleeping behind Zenko. The Human woman’s eyes were soft and tender with motherly concern. But when they returned to Zenko, they were cold and hard, dangerous.

This was yet another thing that intrigued Zenko. Humans were generally soft, breakable things. But when something threatened someone they cared about, they gained a strength that was, ironically, inhuman. Human females like Ying, mothers, were most prone to this fascinating state of mind. Zenko had long ago learned never to threaten a child when there was even the slightest chance of the mother finding out. Mothers were vicious enough to make even a Spirit of Wan Shi Tong’s power hesitate.

“Protect my boy, Zenko,” Ying said, her eyes gleaming in the dark, moonless night. “Bring him back to me.”
Zenko heard the threat. It didn’t have to be said aloud. She heard it and she bowed in acknowledgement. She took no offense. Mothers. Such fascinating creatures.

She loved the wind blowing over her fur when she ran like this. No mortal creature could catch her when she ran at this speed. The dunes of the Si Wong Desert blurred past her, unheeded. Distance meant nothing to a Spirit. Distance was a prison of the physical plane.

Unfortunately, she had no choice but to slow down when she felt Li’s spirit, still held securely in her mouth by her starball, began to quiver. He was still mortal, not a Spirit merged with a mortal like the Bridge. The Avatar may yet learn this skill of travel, but Zenko would not be the one to teach him. Either way, Li had his limits. He would likely never be able to travel like this any further than Wan Shi Tong’s library. Not without significant aid.

She slowed to a stop when she reached the place where Wan Shi Tong’s library once stood, a gem of pearl and white amidst the endless sands. Since the Avatar betrayed the head of her house, the library had been hidden, buried beneath the Si Wong Desert and returned to the Spirit World. Inaccessible by mortals, unless they had a Spirit’s aid.

Zenko swished her tails and dove into the sands, sinking easily into the warmth and darkness. This was always the part that was hardest for Li’s spirit. The darkness and progressive cooling the deeper they went made Li’s spirit shudder, rejecting the opposite of everything he was. Yet another reason why she kept him safe and guarded by her starball. She would let no harm come to him like this.

Then she broke through the fabric of the physical plane and was met by the familiar warmth and light of the library. Home. Her paws clung to the smooth white stone as she bounded down the towering turret at the pinnacle of the library’s dome. When she reached the edge of the dome, she leapt into the air, controlling her descent with the abilities granted by her newest tail.

She felt the head of her house sense her presence the moment she arrived. By the time she landed lightly on the center of the highest bridge, Wan Shi Tong was gliding down to her from wherever he’d been studying the latest research that had caught his interest. Zenko waited until Wan Shi Tong landed, his enormous talons touching the stone bridge silently before opening her mouth and releasing her starball and Li’s spirit.

Gently, she bumped Li’s small red-orange spirit ball with her nose, siphoning some of her own energy into the hitodama and encouraging her Human companion’s consciousness to join hers. It took a few seconds for the small ball of Li’s spiritual self to resolve into a form close to his Human body. When the glow of Li’s inner fire faded, the Human was standing next to her.

He blinked and shook his head, taking a moment to recognize where he was and bow respectfully to Wan Shi Tong. Zenko scooped up her starball, flipping it back to her tail where she could play with it freely. She was safe here in Wan Shi Tong’s library.

“Wan Shi Tong,” Li said, rising from his bow.

“You return,” the Knowledge Spirit said, leaning his head down to stare into Li’s eyes. His ebony eyes, as black as the time before the beginning, turned to Zenko and she wagged her tails with a proud grin. She could feel Wan Shi Tong’s surprise and pride ripple through her. “You have a new
tail, I see,” he said.

:Indeed. Thanks to Li’s friend Jet,: she declared, burying her nose in her newest tail. :I love it.:  

Wan Shi Tong puffed a breath of air on her and she fluffed herself happily. “It suits you,” he said simply.

“Wait,” Li said, staring at Zenko in shock. His pale gold eyes flicked over each tail before settling on the fourth, widening when they saw it. “You- Jet- How?!?”

Zenko snuffled. :What does it matter? You were too busy commenting on my scent to notice,: she said. She sneezed in disdain. She could feel Li’s spirit form flush as Wan Shi Tong laughed softly. :Wan Shi Tong,: she said, straightening and meeting her superior’s gaze. :Where is the Professor?:

The Knowledge Spirit straightened to his full height and turned his head almost completely around. “I believe he is in the astronomy section,” he said, turning his head back to face her and tilting it slightly in curiosity. “Why do you ask?”

:I think Li would benefit from the Professor’s help,: she said, turning his open gaze to her Human companion. :You had questions for him, did you not Li?:

Li’s spirit form flickered, reflecting his uncertainty. “I…” He bit his lip and lifted his gaze to Wan Shi Tong hesitantly. “I do. Would it be alright if I spoke with him?”

Wan Shi Tong bobbed his head in a nod. “Of course,” he said. He gestured with one large, black wing to an aisle of books behind him. “That way. Three aisles back to the left.”

Bowing respectfully once more, Li said, “Thank you, Ancient One.”

Then Li hurried past the Knowledge Spirit and down the specified aisle, following Wan Shi Tong’s directions. Zenko remained behind on the bridge with the head of her house.

“Now,” Wan Shi Tong said, folding his wing and returning his gaze to his subordinate, “what did you wish to discuss away from the Human’s ears?”

Zenko wrapped her tails around her paws and met Wan Shi Tong’s ebony gaze with her own cobalt. :There is a Spirit in Ba Sing Se who has… changed from her true nature,: she said. :I do not know how or why as of yet. But her change… concerns me.:  

The Knowledge Spirit narrowed his eyes and tilted his head like the bird of prey he chose to resemble. “Explain,” he commanded.

:She was once a Woman in White,: Zenko said. :She is no longer. I am unsure what she is now. She tried to entice Li to his death but he resisted her and set up a barrier which was reinforced by the Dai Li. However, Li was not unfaithful. He is not in a relationship with anyone as of yet. : Zenko’s gaze hardened. :He should not have been her prey.:  

“And yet he was,” Wan Shi Tong murmured. “Most curious. The Dai Li who aided Li, are they known to you?”

:One is,: she replied. :His name is Tengfei and he came to Li’s aid previously. The other is not known to me, but he appeared to be Tengfei’s partner.:  

“Ah.” The Knowledge Spirit ruffled his feathers as he considered his subordinate’s words. “Walk with me. There is much I wish to know.”
Professor Zei

Chapter Summary

In which Li meets Professor Zei, gets side-tracked, distracted, has his personal bubble popped, and wishes he could remember.

Li moved down the aisles of books, counting them until he reached the end of the third aisle. Then he turned left and began looking around for another Human or anyone other than the Knowledge Seekers darting here and there. They mostly ignored him now although a few of the noticeably younger fox Spirits still paused to look at him curiously.

He didn’t see anyone else. His eyes scanned the area curiously for any sign of life. Naturally, that was when he tripped over a stack of books and stumbled, flailing out for something to grab and catch himself before he fell face first onto the floor. His fingers managed to snag the ledge of a bookcase just before he tumbled into a person staring up at him in shock.

Well, found Professor Zei. Maybe.

Sitting with his back against a bookcase, a bunch of books and papers stacked up on his right, and a scroll open in his lap was a man. He had Earth Kingdom dark skin, brown hair pulled back in a long braid, and wore simple, cream colored, loose fitting robes.

Li flushed in embarrassment. “Uh…”

A bright, bewildered smile lit up the man’s- Spirit’s face and Li’s eyes widened in shock. This had to be him. This had to be Professor Zei. He wasn’t a ghost like Li had expected him to be, though. He felt like a Spirit. So this is what Zenko meant when she said the professor could stay in Wan Shi Tong’s library for eternity.

“Well,” the Spirit who had once been Human said, chuckling lightheartedly, “this wouldn’t be the first time someone’s almost fallen on me in a library before. But it is the first time in this library.” Raven-crows feet wrinkled at the corners of his eyes as his smile turned into laughter. “I’m Professor Zei,” he said, holding out a hand expectantly. “What’s your name, son?”

“Uh…” Li straightened, shifting so he stood in front of the still seated professor and not leaning over the man - Spirit! - awkwardly. “Um, Li,” he said, taking the professor’s hand hesitantly and shaking it. “I’m called Li.”

“Just called?” the professor asked curiously, tugging his hand back and setting the scroll in his lap aside. “Is ‘Li’ not your name?”

Li licked his lips and shrugged. “I-I don’t actually know,” he said taking a seat on the floor across from Zei. He cleared his throat and quickly changed the subject. “Were you…” Oh, this was weird. “Did you used to teach at the Ba Sing Se University?” he settled on asking.

Zei smiled and nodded. “I did, yes. I had great students. They were always interested in learning. Well,” he corrected with a chuckle, “most of the time anyway. There was this one young man who loved studying. Wanted to work with his hands, you see. I was looking forward to taking him on
one of my expeditions before he disappeared.”

Li blinked. “Disappeared?” he asked hesitantly.

Zei’s smile faded. “It happens every now and then,” he said sadly, dropping his gaze to the scroll he’d been reading. “He wasn’t the first student to disappear and I’m sure he won’t be the last.” He sighed. “I remember all of them,” he murmured. “Every one.”

This wasn’t exactly what Li had intended to talk about, but he was probably the first Human Zei had met since his… death. So Li crossed his legs comfortably, leaned back against the bookcase, and listened.

“How did they disappear?” Li asked. He was fairly certain he knew the reason why, but he wanted to be sure. “Was it… the Dai Li?”

The professor’s eyes sparkled in wry amusement. “You’ve been to Ba Sing Se, I see,” he said.

“I’m actually there right now,” Li said, crossing his arms over his chest and letting his shoulders droop.

The professor sat up in surprise. “You are?” he gasped.

“I’ve met the Dai Li too,” Li said nodding. “Well, two of them anyway.”

“Ah, yes. I see,” Zei said, nodding grimly. “That explains it.” He dropped his gaze and stared at the scroll, tugging it back into his lap and running a hand over it.

Li shifted, suddenly uncomfortable with the gloomy atmosphere that settled over the professor’s Spirit. He took a deep breath in, held it for a count of three, and let it out slowly through his nose.

“You…” How did Li voice this without sounding… well, quite frankly, like a rude jerk? “Um, no offense, but are you dead?”

Surprisingly, the professor laughed. “I did die,” he said, holding up a finger in mild censure. “I’m not dead anymore.” He sighed and gazed up at the books around him in bliss. “Now I can read and study for eternity. It’s so glorious. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted.”

Oh-kay. Li couldn’t think of anything he wanted badly enough he’d die for it, but okay. To each their own.

“Why- How did you die?” he asked.

“Hmm? Oh, I suppose I suffocated,” Zei said.

Li paled.

“Although I guess the more accurate description would be I was buried alive,” the professor corrected himself, tapping his chin thoughtfully with his finger and Li shrank in on himself in horror. “Sand really does get everywhere,” Zei said mildly, brushing his cream colored tunic dismissively and Li felt sick to his stomach. “I keep finding grains of sand in odd places. But it’s a small price to pay for all this knowledge.” He lifted his smiling face to Li and blinked in concern. “Goodness, dear boy. Are you alright? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Li stared at the professor in horrified disbelief. “How can you joke about that?!” he cried.

Zei tried to hold back a smile and failed miserably. Finally, he gave in and laughed merrily. “I
guess the thought of death never really bothered me before,” he said. “But since I died and still got to stay here in this wondrous library with so much knowledge and history yet to be read, how can I possibly feel bothered? It was such a small price to pay.”

Terrified, Li shrank away from the professor who had a very serious problem with his perception of things. He pulled his knees up to his chest and tucked his arms between his thighs and chest, curling his fingers into protective fists.

“What is wrong with you?” Li breathed.

Befuddled, Professor Zei looked at the boy huddled in front of him as if he was finally seeing something he hadn’t noticed before. Perhaps he was. The professor’s eyebrows dipped low over his eyes and his amusement faded away to something small and sympathetic.

“I guess yours wasn’t pleasant either,” he said gently. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think about that. I sometimes get carried away and lose control of my tongue. My sincerest apologies.”

And now the Spirit professor was bowing to Li?! Why? This was so confusing? Li just wanted to ask the man a few questions and now he could barely remember what those questions were. He wasn’t even sure what was going on anymore. He had a headache.

“Apology accepted, I guess,” he mumbled. He didn’t relax from his curled position but he allowed the tension in his shoulders to ease somewhat. “I met someone who knew you,” he said, placing his hands on top of his knees and resting his chin on them. “Toph Bei Fong.”

“Toph!” Zei crowed excitedly. “Such an interesting young girl. It never occurred to me that a blind earthbender would be able to ‘see’ with their own earthbending before. Very interesting to talk to.”

“Right,” Li drawled. “So, she said she came here with you but she didn’t go in.”

“She didn’t, no,” Zei confirmed, shaking his head regretfully. “She stayed above ground with the Avatar’s flying bison.”

Li blinked. “A- A what now?”

“A flying bison,” Zei said, leaning forward with wide eyes that sparkled with enthusiasm. “It was the beast used by the Air Nomads for travel. Supposedly there is an animal of such great importance for each of the four Nations.” He tapped his chin. “That actually makes sense, now that I think about it. Knowing what I do now, I believe the Avatar’s bison, Appa, was actually Aang’s animal spirit guide. Yes, that would make sense.”

The professor drifted into soft hums and mumbled half-spoken thoughts. He nodded to himself once, twice, then looked back up at Li with a grin. “What about Toph?”

Dear Agni. The professor’s mind was all over the place. Li could barely keep up.

“Anyway,” he said, frowning. “Did the Avatar really lie to Wan Shi Tong?”

“Ah.”

So yes, then.

Zei heaved a sigh and hung his head. “He… did, yes,” he admitted softly. “Wan Shi Tong did not want the knowledge he’s amassed here to be used for petty purposes such as war. The Avatar gave his word not to do that, but he allowed himself to be swayed by his friend, Sokka.” The professor’s
entire form drooped. “I admit, I was complacent in that. I knew Sokka wanted information that would give him an advantage in the war against the Fire Nation, but I did nothing to stop him and said nothing to Wan Shi Tong.”

Li curled up tighter and pondered the professor’s words. He believed them, but he could barely believe them. The Avatar was supposed to be the Bridge between the Human World and the Spirit World. For him to knowingly and willingly lie to and betray a Spirit…

“Why?” he murmured. “Why would he do that? Why to Wan Shi Tong? He’s the Knowledge Spirit. Are they enemies or something?”

“I don’t believe so,” Zei said, shaking his head. “But I understand why he did it.”

“Why?” Li demanded, lifted his head and glaring at Zei. “What was so important the Avatar felt the need to… to do that?”

“It was something about 'the darkest day in Fire Nation history,'” the professor explained. "I believe it had something to do with a solar eclipse."

Why did those words make Li feel so cold inside?

"That's actually why I'm researching astronomy, at the moment," Zei continued. "I'm curious about how the library's planetarium works. I had no idea the heavenly bodies could be predicted so accurately."

"What does a celestial event have to do with any of this?” Li demanded.

"The war with the Fire Nation is not going well,” the professor said with a heavy sigh, “for either side, as far as I know. I have never heard of a war that lasted for one hundred years without pause. Even the histories I’ve read from before Avatar Roku’s time never spoke of a war anything like this. The oldest records I’ve found so far hint at some long-standing conflicts, but again,” he shook his head, “nothing like the war now.”

“But Wan Shi Tong isn’t involved in this war,” Li argued, clenching his fists. “Why treat him like that?”

The professor’s forehead crinkled and he tilted his head curiously. “You seem very hung up on that issue, Li. Why? You are- or were Human. Why would this bother you so much?”

...were?

“I’m still Human,” Li argued, “and I have a problem with it because it’s wrong. You don’t lie and steal from someone who could be your ally. Not if you want to keep any chance of an alliance alive. Never antagonize someone who isn’t already involved and who has the power to wipe you out with ease. Everyone knows that.”

“Er, no, I don’t think everyone knows that, young man,” Zei said in what Li could only call his Professor’s Voice. “I certainly didn’t. Although, I grant you, it does make sense. Still, I can honestly say I have never heard of that before.”

Frustration roiled up in Li’s chest. Details! “What does that matter?!” he cried, slapping a hand on the floor by his side where the air shimmered dully. “You died because the Avatar lied and stole from a Spirit!”

“Actually I died because I chose to stay here instead of leave with the Avatar,” Zei corrected.
“Who left because he lied and stole from Wan Shi Tong!” Li countered sharply, glaring venomously. “No matter how you look at it, your death is on the Avatar’s head. It’s on that Sokka person’s head at the very least. Whatever they found here that was so important could probably be found somewhere else if he’d bothered to look!” he snarled, sweeping a hand in front of him to emphasize his point.

When Zei didn’t respond immediately, Li hesitated, wrenching his fury back under control. He shouldn’t be yelling at the professor anyway. It wasn’t his fault anyway. If anything, Zei was a victim in this whole debacle. Yelling at him would do nothing but dry up Li’s throat and make him feel like a jerk.

With a huff, Li curled back up and sulked. He didn’t dare say anything else. He was too angry. He felt hot and flushed and he could feel the air around him getting warmer. His bending was getting away from him. In, hold, out. Calm down, cool down. Relax. Don’t lash out. Not at Zei. Save that for someone else.

“By Yu Huang’s throne,” Zei breathed, staring at Li with eyes full of wonder. “You’re a firebender.”

Li flinched, the tension he’d worked out of his system by breathing suddenly coming back full force. It took a moment for Li’s mind to process where he was and latch onto the fact that he was here in Wan Shi Tong’s library. Not in Ba Sing Se. Here, he was welcome to practice his bending, so long as he did so in the atrium and kept well away from the bookshelves and artifacts. Here, he was safe.

Forcing himself to breathe, Li nodded. “I am,” he said.

Professor Zei blinked once then burst into a brilliant smile. He tossed his scroll away and crawled across the hallway floor so he sat right in front of Li and said, “Can you tell me about the Fire Nation?”

“Uh, w-what?” Li gasped. And no, his voice did not climb up an octave.

“Oh, I’ve always wanted to go to the Fire Nation,” Zei moaned, clasping his hands by his chest dreamily. “It’s just about the only place in the known world I’ve never been to. What I would give to be able to see the capitol city. I heard it’s built right into the crater of an active volcano! Just imagine the engineering required to accomplish such a feat. Why, the architecture alone must be a marvel. Li,” he grasped both of Li’s shoulders and held on, “tell me, what’s it like there?”

“...I...”

...Zenko? Jet? Someone. Help?!?

:He does not remember.: 

Oh, thank Agni!

Zei sat back and lifted his stunned gaze to where Zenko stood on the bookcase Li was pressed up against. Her paws rested lighting on the spines of two books as she gazed down at Li’s and Zei’s heads. Li glanced up at her, pleading with his eyes for her to come and get his personal bubble back!

He felt the comfortingly familiar weight of Zenko’s paws land on his head and sighed in relief when her tails curled around his bare throat. Reaching up, he grabbed handfuls of her fluffy fur and clung to her self-consciously. She bopped him lightly on the forehead with her damp nose before
hopping down to his shoulders where she preferred to lounge.

*He does not remember.* she repeated, her crystalline blue eyes open and locked on the professor. *He has no memories from before a few weeks ago.*

“My word,” Zei said, leaning blessedly back and staring at both Li and the fox Spirit. “Four tails. Never in all my days…” He pressed a fist to his palm, closed the palm over his fist, and bowed in a show of traditional Earth Kingdom respect. “Honored Knowledge Seeker,” he said, “young Li, forgive my enthusiasm. It’s just, you’re the first firebender I’ve met who didn’t try to kill me.”

Li felt all the air rush out of him as if he’d been punched in the stomach. His gaze dropped to the ground and did not lift. Was all Fire evil? Was he the only firebender out there not hell-bent on murder?

*No!* Zenko’s voice jolted through his mind like lightning, cutting off that thread of thought before it was allowed to progress. *You are not alone. On this, you have my word.*

“You should take those words to heart, Li,” the professor said in a gentle but firm voice. “Spirits rarely give their word to Humans. Even those of us who were once Human like you and I rarely find ourselves on the receiving end of such a gift.”

“I am still Human,” Li groused.

The sympathetic look Zei gave him made Li’s nerves dance with worry. “It must have been sudden,” the professor said, looking at the scar on Li’s face. “I hope it wasn’t painful for long.”

What was he trying to…

Wait.

“You think… I’m dead?” Li asked, thoroughly confused. At Zei’s look, Li’s heart clenched. “I’m not dead. I’m alive. In Ba Sing Se. Sleeping.” He shook his head slowly. “This is a dream. I’m dreaming.”

Zei tilted his head forward slightly and lifted both of his brown eyebrows in silent disbelief.

“I’m dreaming!” Li insisted, clutching Zenko’s tails tightly. She nipped him gently and he had to consciously loosen his fingers. “I’m not dead.”

*You are not.*

Li breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed.

“He’s not?” The honest surprise in Professor Zei’s voice caught Li off guard. “You’re sure?” Zei insisted. At the fox Spirit’s nod, the professor stared at Li with sharp, assessing eyes. “You are not here physically,” he said, his gaze taking in Li’s form, “and this is not a dream. How have you come here?”

*He had aid.* Zenko whispered, flicking her ear so the fur brushed Li’s face. *But he will soon be able to do this on his own.*

Do what?

*Li speaks truly. His body still sleeps in Ba Sing Se.*; Zenko explained, *but his spirit is here. It is a form as astral projection.*
What? What?! At least Zei also seemed shocked. That made Li feel better. Slightly.

:His gift with spiritual sense has helped him master the first steps of loosening the bonds of spirit to flesh,: she continued. :I’m merely aiding him to be sure he does not harm himself by attempting something still beyond his capabilities,: her blue eyes darkened, :and to be sure no malicious Spirits prey on him in this vulnerable state.: 

Li was speechless. He was… How…? Since when? Why couldn’t he remember doing this?

:It is natural not to remember some things in this process,: Zenko said, resting her head on top of Li’s and making a soothing sound by his ear that had his eyelids drooping as if to a lullaby. :The conscious mind is not fully formed within a hitodama until it is forcefully connected. The waking mind is more closely bound to the flesh and the unconscious mind to the spirit.: 

“Is anyone watching his body?” Zei asked in his Professor Voice.

:There was when we left,: Zenko said, swishing one of her tails. :But with Tui gone from this night sky, it would be best if we returned now. You need rest,: she said, nuzzling Li’s unscarred cheek, :and I need to think.: 

Alright. But Li wanted some answers tomorrow. Zenko made a chirping sound and Li trusted her. She would explain, later, when they were safe. But what about Wan Shi Tong? Didn’t Zenko need to talk to him too? And what about his bending practice and the memories he needed to give to-

:We have spoken,: Zenko said. :I will need to research once we return, but I have what I need to do so. Have you asked your questions?: 

Yes. Li had what he wanted. Sort of. Something told him he wouldn’t be getting much else tonight. Maybe tomorrow night, or the next. Now that he knew for certain Zei was here and willing to talk to him, Li would write down his questions and find a way to take them here with him. Otherwise, Li just knew he’d be distracted by the professor’s rambling and forget his questions again.

Zenko made a gekkering sound that was so much like laughter and then began warbling again. It was such a soothing sound. It made him feel so… very… tired.
Chapter Summary

In which Jet tries to come to terms with his conflicting emotions, Roulan tries to handle a mess, and curses moonless nights.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Couple quick things:

First, the characters Ye Xiu, Chen Guo, Tang Rou, and Su Muchang are all characters from the webnovel, manhua, and anime The King's Avatar. This is not a crossover with The King's Avatar, I'm simply borrowing the characters because I need them and don't feel like creating more OCs than I already have. No previous knowledge of these characters is needed. If you're curious about them, just Google them.

Second, 'Yellow wine' is an old type of ancient Chinese alcohol made from millet. It was popular before rice became the main grain for distilling alcohol. In ancient China, alcohol was regarded as a sacred liquid often reserved for offerings. It wasn't until later that it became an ordinary drink.

The setting for this fic has the nice, expensive alcohol often used for rituals and rites and the more common, cheaper alcohol used as a regular drink. Except that the Middle and Upper Ring citizens aren't very spiritual people so those 'rituals' and 'rites' often involve banquets where the alcohol is... used. Respectfully, of course. ...*cough*

Jet kicked the door closed behind him and sincerely hoped it wasn’t an omen. He could still see the heartbroken expression on Li’s face when he left him outside the door to his apartment complex. A part of him wanted to go back and kiss the living shit out of Li, but another, older, damaged part of him kept him walking away. He needed time away from Li to process this. He needed to talk about this with Smellerbee and Longshot. He needed to sleep on this.

“You’re back?” ‘Bee called, looking up from her bowl of cooling noodles in surprise.

“What? I live here,” Jet grumbled. He stalked over to the bowl of noodles sitting on the stone counter above the stove.

“There’s not much left,” ‘Bee said, leaning back against the apartment wall. “We ate it all ‘cause we didn’t think you’d be back tonight.”

Next to her, Longshot tipped his straw hat up just enough to glance curiously at Jet before letting it drop back over his eyes in disinterest. Smellerbee nudged Longshot’s elbow with her foot and he lifted his arm just enough for her to stretch out her leg, resting his arm on her shin when she stilled.

Jet rolled his eyes in fond annoyance. Smellerbee was right. There really wasn’t much left. They
really thought he’d get lucky and sleep over with Li tonight. Too bad he hadn’t. He licked his lips and shook his head.

“What happened?” Smellerbee asked around a mouthful of noodles. “Li come too fast and kick you out?”

Jet snorted even though his heart wasn’t in it. He left his heart with Li. He scrunched his face because that was sappy as crap and not something Jet would normally think. Damn it all. Jet was hopeless.

“Actually,” he said, slumping down next to Smellerbee and chomping on a clump of cool noodles, “we didn’t get that far.”

He could practically feel the flat disbelief in the brown gaze weighing heavily on his shoulders. He bumped Smellerbee’s shoulder with his own and grunted. She snorted and bumped him right back.

“What happened?” she said. Her voice was gruff, but the familiar softness of the caring friend Jet knew she was was still audible there. “Do I need to cut anyone?”

Jet snickered, before his grin vanished. “Maybe,” he said seriously. “I’m still waiting for more information on that at the moment.” ‘Bee shot him a grim look before returning her gaze to her noodles and waiting for him to continue. “Did you hear about the incident at the potter’s complex this morning?” Jet asked.

‘Bee hummed an affirmative. “Hard not to,” she said. “People may disappear here often enough that not many question it. But when kids die, especially like that,” she grimaced and Jet felt her elbow him gently in a show of concerned support, “word gets around. Besides,” she added quietly, “we know Li lives there. I guess he saw that.”

Jet dipped his chin. “Yeah, he did,” Jet confirmed. “He didn’t take it very well. He’s had a rough day.”

“That why you didn’t bed him?” she asked.

“No,” Jet admitted softly, running his fingers through his messy hair and scratching his scalp. “That...” He slid his hand to his throat and let his head thump against the wooden wall. “We decided to take it slow.”

Now both Smellerbee and Longshot were staring at him in disbelief. Okay, so maybe Jet didn’t do slow, but geez! Show some support in his self-control. What great friends he had.

“Bullshit,” ‘Bee said flatly.

Jet shot them both a weak glare and plucked a straw from Longshot’s hat. His friend gave him a disgruntled look before tipping his hat away from Jet’s fingers. Jet snickered and stuck the straw in his mouth.

He missed this. His straw, his friends, his family, this easy comradery... He missed it. All of it. And someone in this rundown apartment complex was slicing onions and Jet was not happy about it.

“I’m not kidding,” he said, chewing on the straw and crossing his arms over his chest. “Li told me something in confidence and I’m still trying to process it.”

“That bad?”
Longshot’s voice was soft and rough from disuse but Jet felt some tension ease out of him at the sound of it. For a good year after Longshot came to his arboreal family of Freedom Fighters, he refused to speak a word. Jet still wasn’t sure what exactly Longshot had seen that made him seal away his voice, but he was fine not knowing. Everyone in Jet’s family had experienced terrible things. Everyone had a right to their secrets.

When Longshot spoke the first time, Jet about had a cow-pig. He’d somehow managed to keep himself from glomping his friend proudly. Longshot had proven himself again and again to be a loyal and trustworthy friend and Jet relied on him. Longshot may have fired the arrow that ultimately destroyed the dam above the town of Gaipan, but it had been at Jet’s command. That ate at Jet like hardly anything else. Longshot had trusted Jet and Jet deliberately led his friend to commit mass murder. They may not have succeeded but the intent had been there.

And yet even after that, Longshot refused to let Jet leave the Freedom Fighters alone with his guilt. That made a much bigger impact on Jet’s psyche than he ever realized until tonight. It was entirely possible that if Longshot had not willingly accepted and shared some of that guilt, Jet would have descended into a kind of madness driven by anger and despair. If Jet had ever found out Li’s secret while in that state, he was certain he would have tried to kill the tea waiter right then and there.

He hadn’t. That had to count for something.

“Li’s a firebender,” Jet said.

Longshot sat bolt upright, staring at Jet in silent shock. Smellerbee wasn’t much different. Both of his friends’ brown eyes were wide and full of so many emotions, Jet didn’t bother to catalogue them all.

“He- What?!” Smellerbee cried.

She swiftly shut her mouth and scrambled up to pull the shutters of their window shut, latching them securely. It wouldn’t do much if a Dai Li decided to listen in on their conversation, but it made them all feel a bit better. She then crouched back in her spot and glared at Jet.

“Explain,” she demanded in a fierce whisper.

Jet sighed through his nose and shrugged, trying very hard to appear nonchalant. “He’s a firebender,” he repeated as calmly as he could.

“I got that,” ‘Bee snapped. “Give me more.”

“I don’t really know what more you want,” Jet said, staring absentely at the far wall across from him. “He’s a firebender. But,” he sighed again, “he doesn’t use his bending to hurt or kill. If I hadn’t seen him fight… Spirits, if I hadn’t actually fought him myself, I wouldn’t think he was even capable of hurting someone else. He’s so clumsy and socially awkward and blushy and just- Ugh!” He covered his face with his hands and groaned. “Fuck me sideways, I like him.”

Neither Smellerbee nor Longshot said anything and Jet felt the silence weigh on him. “I don’t know what to do,” he said. “I don’t know what to think. He’s a firebender but you know what he used his firebending to do? Keep people safe.” He waved one hand vaguely before letting his drop to his lap. “He used it to put up this spell that would keep the idiot aristocrats in the Middle Ring safe from this Woman in White Spirit. He doesn’t know any of them and he still did it.”

He pulled his knees up to his chest and hugged them, ducking his head so his face was hidden by the shadows of his legs and arms. “He protected them but he’s a firebender and I don’t know what
“Damn,” he said. Damn those fucking onions. “He was ready to walk away from me if I couldn’t handle it and rejected him- Spirits, he did walk away and he wasn’t expecting me to go after him but I did and that bitch Spirit tried to kill him before I got to him and that guy from the library is a fucking Dai Li and my brain is breaking. Spirits, fucking why?!"

Smellerbee rested a hand on his back and began rubbing it gently. Seriously though, fuck whoever was cutting onions because Jet’s eyes were burning. He felt so small and confused and conflicted. He wanted Li here but he was so damn scared.

“I’m sorry,” ‘Bee whispered, wrapping her arms around Jet’s shaking body and rubbing his back. “Jet, I’m so sorry.”

Another hand touched his head and just pressed. Longshot. The archer didn’t speak, but his silence was comforting and familiar and nonjudgmental. He needed his friends’ support right now. He could feel his heart breaking from the conflicting emotions clawing at him. And the worst part about all of this? He wanted Li here too.

It was more than just lust at this point. That scared the living shit out of Jet. He’d never felt much beyond lust for anyone before. He may have felt more for Katara had things not gone differently, but he hadn’t had time. There hadn’t been time then and Jet didn’t want to have that time now. He didn’t feel anything but a lingering disgruntled anger and a tingle of fear for Katara. But Li…

The lust was still there. Spirits, the things Jet wanted to do to the tea waiter were obscene and made him salivate with desire. But it didn’t stop there. He didn’t just want Li’s body. He wanted Li. He wanted everything about the waiter. He even wanted his firebending.

Jet had already caught himself wondering if it was possible to screw Li so hard he made the waiter lose control and bend by accident. That scared him and excited him and Jet couldn’t take this. He still wanted to try it.

“Damn,” he heard Smellerbee mutter above him. “Li’s Mushi’s nephew.”

What did that have to do with...

Oh. Spirits. Mushi was probably a firebender too. The old, tea-loving coot was a firebender and all he did day-in and day-out was brew and serve tea. Jet may have groaned, because he definitely didn’t moan. He knew two firebenders and they were both in Ba Sing Se, the heart of the Earth Kingdom, and they were both refugees and he actually liked them both and sweet Spirits what was his life coming to?

Yu Huang, if the Great Spirit even existed, then by all that was holy, make Jet’s life make sense again.

Roulan sat in Master Ye Xiu’s healing rooms washing her hands for the nth time that evening. She was exhausted and needed sleep. Too bad. She wouldn’t be getting any, not for a while yet. The number of patients that had come in over the past couple days had slowly increased until their humble healing establishment was beginning to stretch at the seams.

Master Ye Xiu was working studiously through the night as he was wont to do. He was a regular night cat-owl who thrived in the darker hours of the day. Considering his occupation as a waterbending healer, it made sense why he was the way he was. Roulan had tried working the night shift with Master Xiu but struggled. She had been positively thrilled when Journeyman Chen
Guo’s little cousin Apprentice Tang Rou had been hired and taken Roulan’s place working through the night hours with relative ease.

Normally, Roulan shared the day shifts GuoGuo leaving Little Tang to share the night shift with Master Xiu. But tonight wasn’t a normal night. Tonight was the new moon so Master Xiu was feeling the drain from bending much sooner than usual. Master Xiu was the only waterbending healer in this quadrant of Ba Sing Se so they saw the majority of the very ill patients from this area. Anything too great for them to handle, they sent to the other waterbenders.

Most of the few waterbenders in Ba Sing Se lived further south and either worked the fishing industry in Full Moon Bay or manned the handful of healing huts there. Those who were exceptionally skilled were offered jobs in the Middle Ring and high-tailed it up there as fast as they could pack up their few possessions. Unfortunately, that left quadrants like Roulan’s bereft of enough healing huts to handle the sheer number of patients.

Also, whoever dubbed places like this ‘healing huts’ deserved to be on the wrong end of a distracted apprentice’s acupuncture needle. Hut, indeed. This was not a hut. It was her home, her work, her life. Master Xiu and GuoGuo, his second-in-command, made sure the Autumn Leaf Clinic maintained a clean interior and exterior at all times. It was necessary to aid in convincing the other healing clinics to join them in establishing their fledgling Tiny Herb Healers Guild.

But tonight, cleanliness was not at the forefront of anyone’s mind. Oh, Roulan made sure she left everything as clean as she could, but given the number of patients filling their little clinic’s rooms, she simply didn’t know where to start. They had been forced to set up awnings over the back patio and lay patients out there as well. They had to be careful not to infringe on the herb garden, but they quite simply needed the room. They needed more room.

When she took the afternoon off, she had left about six patients in the capable Journeyman hands of GuoGuo. The brunette lady was younger than Roulan and always happy to work and keep her patients in a good mood. Her soft brown eyes, long brown hair, and pale skin made GuoGuo seem younger than she was. She was the Big Sister of the clinic and was fully capable of handling the patients. Especially since Little Tang joined her right before Roulan took off.

Now Roulan was regretting taking that time off. She’d returned to nearly a dozen patients, five of whom were children, and a frantic GuoGuo. Even Little Tang who was the quieter of the two cousins, was beginning to mutter soft, stressed curses. Roulan had opted to take responsibility and woke up Master Xiu so they had all hands on deck.

She had seen this illness before, but never like this. Her patients were vomiting, suffering from stomach pains and diarrhea, and were running fevers. Many of the patients’ stools were bloody too. That meant the culprit was likely contamination of some kind. She could only guess at the source.

Contaminated food happened on occasion, but it was usually easily tracked down to a particular market or restaurant. Contaminated water was much more rare and harder to come by in Ba Sing Se. Most of the water in the city came from underground wells, cisterns on rooftops filled with rainwater, and the very few above-ground canals flowing through the city.

While Master Xiu bent his way through the flood of patients with Journeyman GuoGuo’s help, Little Tang did her best to clean up. Meanwhile, Roulan interrogated the patients who could still think and speak clearly past their exhaustion, bile-burned throats, and dehydration. The healers had to find the source of this illness and put a stop to it before it spread any further.

Speaking of which, where was that Guard from earlier? Hopefully, he was spreading the word of this outbreak. The Guards in this district were well aware of the outbreak and were doing their best
to contain it and keep any sign of public panic to a minimum. But sometimes, as much as Roulan hated to admit it, the subtly and iron fisted control of the Dai Li was needed.

The infernal ding of the little bell above the clinic’s front door rang again and Roulan cursed colorfully. “If you have patients, put them on the back patio. Otherwise, wait your turn,” she called in a curt, no-nonsense voice.

A soft, tired chuckle from the corner next to Roulan where Master Xiu was sitting and resting before returning to the clinic floor caught her attention. Ye Xiu had midnight black hair that he kept cut short to keep it from getting in his way during work and eyes the same shade. His skin was paler than most waterbenders Roulan had met. But, then again, he was also the only male healing waterbender she had met too. Supposedly, his father had been Earth Kingdom and his mother had been Water Tribe.

Either way, he knew what he was doing and had earned himself the title of Master Healer at his young age from his hard work and dedication to his craft. Ye Xiu may be closer to that Li boy’s age than Roulan’s, but he knew his limits. If Master Xiu was resting now, he must be near exhaustion. Benders drew on their own chi to bend. Too much bending meant not enough chi which could lead to exhaustion and, if prolonged without rest, death. Too little or no bending had similar results. She was intensely glad she wasn’t a bender. She had enough to deal with as it was.

Roulan glared at the waterbender, swatting his knee hard enough to be scolding but light enough to cause no harm. “Not a peep out of you,” she chided. “Get some rest while you can. GuoGuo, Little Tang, and I can handle this for now.”

Master Xiu’s smile never faded, but the creases at the corner of his eyes softened and he sighed. “I bet,” he said. “But I think it would be best if the Dai Li dealt with me.”

He winked at Roulan’s shock, the little rascal. Fuming and more than a little afraid, Roulan took a deep breath to ground herself and turned to face the Autumn Leaf Clinic’s latest visitors. Sure enough, they were Dai Li. Damn. Why couldn’t Master Xiu be wrong just this once?

She cast her earth brown gaze around at the restless patients laid out on the full clinic floor and groaned, rolling her eyes. Drying her hands on a clean towel, she stood and strode to the two men dressed in formal emerald green. One was younger than the other and it showed in how his wide light brown eyes darted around the many sick people. The older Dai Li was obviously more experienced. His calm green eyes took in the situation but did not waver. Good. Roulan did not have time for blithering idiots, Dai Li or not.

“What do you want?” she demanded, planting her feet an even distance apart and crossing her arms. “Unless you have something important to say or do, do us all a favor and stay out of the way.”

Well, that younger Dai Li had a bit of a temper. She sniffed in disdain.

“We’re here to help,” the older Dai Li said, not-so-subtly elbowing his younger partner in the ribs. “The Guard informed us of a potential epidemic. We understand it’s likely due to contaminated food?”

Well, she did wish for the Dai Li’s involvement. Yu Huang, sometimes it was best if her wishes were not taken seriously.

“We’re not sure,” she said, easing her stance and sweeping her expert gaze over her patients. GuoGuo was kneeling by one of the children’s mats, trying to give them water and hoping it would
stay down. “As far as we can determine, most of them didn’t visit the same places to eat or drink within the first day or two of symptom onset.”

The older Dai Li nodded thoughtfully. “Is there any common location they visited or person they saw that you know of?” he asked.

Roulan tsked. “No, nothing.” She nodded to Little Tang who was hobbling in from the back patio with two empty buckets. “They’re mostly all from this district, but not all of them.”

“We don’t have a good map of this quadrant,” Master Xiu spoke up from his corner. “If we had one, we could try mapping out where everyone was during the first day or so before their symptoms appeared.”

Roulan groaned because he needed to rest. But also- “He’s right,” she said. “A map would be excellent.”

The younger Dai Li snorted. “A reliable map in a city of earthbenders,” she heard him mutter. It didn’t sound disdainful so much as mildly despairing so she didn’t give in to her first impulse and smack the young man upside the head.

“Some things are permanent, young man,” she said sternly. “Small roads may change, but residences, restaurants, and businesses rarely change.”

“A rough map would be enough,” Master Xiu said, directing his words to the older Dai Li. “Just something we can use to create a rough area of afflicted people. It’s possible the source of this is near the center.”

“Master Xiu,” Roulan said without looking back, “if you don’t get some rest, I’ll sic GuoGuo on you and have that girlfriend of yours, Su Muchang, sit on you.”

The young waterbender huffed a laugh but fell silent.

“You must be Master Ye Xiu,” the older Dai Li said, tipping his head to the exhausted healer in respect. “Other than a map, what else do you need from us?”

Roulan sighed and resigned herself to the fact Master Xiu would not be resting for a while.

The waterbending healer sighed thoughtfully. “Water,” he said finally. “I need water. Lots of it. Little Tang’s been making regular visits to the well, but we need her here.” He sat back wearily. “And more waterbenders and healers if you can spare them. This could get worse just as quickly as it could get better, but I doubt it.”

“Understood,” the Dai Li said.

Hmm, Roulan liked this one. Short, to-the-point, and respectful. She didn’t see that very often in some people.

“If you think of anything else you may need, ask for Tengfei or my partner Shanyuan,” the older Dai Li said.

“May I ask what the Dai Li’s interest in this is?” Master Xiu asked.

Roulan almost hit herself. Why hadn’t she thought to ask that? Yet young Master Xiu who was half asleep already and still smiling that secretive smile of his had thought to ask that. The Dai Li rarely got involved in affairs like this unless they thought it could become a full-fledged epidemic or if
there was something else involved.

*Yu Huang, Roulan silently prayed, if you have any mercy and insist on taking my wishes seriously, then please, for the love of all that is holy, do not let this be any more serious than it already was. And please, don’t let anyone die from this.*

If the Jade Emperor could manage that, Roulan would personally down a cup of hot tea with a little yellow wine mixed in at his shrine.
In which Jet gets some truth out of Iroh and learns a bit more than he thought he would.

Something was wrong. Iroh wasn’t exactly sure what it was, but something was bothering his nephew. It hurt to see Zuko so gloomy. Iroh had no doubt it was at least partly due to his nephew still feeling depressed over the tragedy yesterday morning. Zuko had a heart that was much too big for Fire Lord Ozai’s preference. Yet another way Zuko had supposedly failed his father.

Iroh loved his brother but he did not support him. Thus watching Zuko’s slow descent into a facsimile of Ozai tore his heart to pieces. The boy was too much like his mother. It seemed no matter how long he lived in Ozai’s shadow, particularly after Fire Lady Ursa vanished and then the three years banished to the unmerciful sea, Zuko could not hide his heart. He tried so hard to bury his hurt and sadness and loneliness somewhere beyond Iroh’s reach. For a while there, during the second year of Zuko’s banishment, Iroh began to fear Zuko would never cry or laugh ever again.

Then the Avatar reappeared and Iroh watched hope soar back into his nephew’s every action. True, Zuko focused that new, fragile emotion towards capturing the Avatar and powering his anger-fueled firebending. But Zuko had hope once more. That’s what mattered.

Iroh would never forget the joy he felt when he and his nephew watched the Avatar and his friends capture the pirates’ ship and Zuko laughed! Perhaps it wasn’t at the best time considering the pirates used their distraction to quickly steal their riverboat, but that didn’t seem to matter. Zuko had laughed. For the first time since his nephew’s banishment, Iroh saw the faintest hint of the little boy who clung to his mother’s dress and rough housed with Lu Ten.

It was so easy for Zuko to slip into Iroh’s heart. Nothing would ever fill the Lu Ten shaped void there, but Zuko’s presence eased the pain. Iroh loved his nephew like a son and had no regrets. He would sooner walk to his own death then knowingly bring his beloved nephew to harm.

So seeing Zuko wearily going through the motions of taking orders and serving tea gnawed at his heart. Not once had Zuko laughed or smiled or put any real effort into his actions. His nephew moved like a dead man walking and just the thought of that filled Iroh with fear. What had happened to his nephew the other night?

The little bell over the Pao Family Tea House’s front door chimed sweetly as a new customer walked in. It was quick, almost too fast to catch, but Iroh noticed it because he’d been looking for it. The swift glance of pale gold eyes at the door, the slightest lift of his nephew’s shoulders, followed by a crushing despair as the light of hope once again drained from Zuko’s face. Ah. Oh, dear Zuko, what happened last night?

Iroh watched Zuko wearily move to the table where the customer sat. Oh, it was that sweet girl who came in the mornings, Jin. Maybe she would have better luck cheering up Zuko than he had. Sometimes a pretty young face was better than an old one.

The bell rang again and Iroh sighed. They had a steady flow of customers since they opened.
Nothing they couldn’t handle. Actually—

A soft knock on the back door facing the alley behind the tea house startled Iroh from his thoughts. Looking up from the teapot he had just set on the small, stove flame, he blinked in shocked confusion. Why would Jet come to the back door? Unless he was looking for some ‘private time’ with Zuko. Iroh smothered a sly grin and held up a finger as he stepped back to lean out of the kitchen and into the common room.

He didn’t think about it when he heard the back door open. So he grunted in surprise when he was yanked back into the kitchen. Blinking in confusion, Iroh caught his balance and stared up at Jet with a thoughtful frown.

“Don’t,” Jet said in a soft, stern voice. “I’m not… Look, just come with me. We need to talk.”

The boy pressed his lips in a thin line as he began tugging Iroh out of the kitchen and into the alley. Movement to Iroh’s left drew their gazes and Jet froze, frowning at the fox Spirit perched on the counter there with her eyes open. Iroh watched as something passed between Jet and the revered Spirit. Whatever it was, it made Jet’s form slump and look away.

Most curious. Well, Iroh did want to know what was bothering his nephew. Perhaps this was his chance. Besides, wasn’t that the wrapped box of tea supplies he’d given Jet to deliver the other day?

“You again?” Pao cried, stepped out of the storage room in the back. He huffed and crossed the kitchen. “What have I told you about being in the kitchen, young man? If you’re not an employee, you don’t belong back here.”

“It is fine, Pao,” Iroh said, seeing the growing discomfort in the way Jet glanced warily towards the common room where Li was still serving the patrons. “He was just returning the tea ceremony set he picked up yesterday. I’ll go out back and make sure everything is clean and accounted for. Could you watch the teapots and kettles for me?”

Pao grumbled, still a bit ruffled, and nodded, waving Iroh away. “Yes, yes, just don’t take too long,” he said briskly, taking Iroh’s place by the teapots.

“Of course,” Iroh said, smiling and patting the tea house owner on the back. “I won’t be long.”

Without waiting for a reply, Iroh followed Jet out into the alley. Ah, it felt wonderful out. The air still had the brisk morning chill of mid-Spring in the shade and the pleasant warmth that soothed the soul in the sunlight shining down between the roofs of the adjacent buildings. He took a deep breath, held it, and breathed out slowly, appreciating the scent of food and the faintest hint of flowers on the breeze.

“Li does that breathing thing too,” Jet said.

Iroh hummed. “It is good for the lungs,” he said gently. “And the air smells so lovely this morning. I would enjoy a goo—”

“Is it a firebending thing?”

Ah. “May I ask how you found out?” Iroh said gently, taking care not to sound angry or afraid as he gazed at Jet with a patient smile.

Jet swallowed and set the box of tea supplies on the ground and stuffed his hands in his pocket. The straw in his mouth swirled around nervously. “He sort of… showed me,” Jet muttered. “He
said he didn’t know until a week or so ago.”

Didn’t know?! To forget he was a bender… How much of Zuko’s memory was gone?

“He knew I probably wouldn’t react well,” Jet continued, “but he still showed me. I—” The straw twirled before swishing to one corner of Jet’s mouth. “Look. Li’s your nephew and a firebender. It wouldn’t be a jump to assume you were a firebender too.” Sharp brown eyes darted to Iroh’s and stayed there.

“It would not, no,” Iroh said with a sigh. “How did my nephew show you?”

Jet huffed a laugh and it sounded so hurt and self deprecating Iroh’s gaze hardened in concern. “He put up a spell,” Jet said, hanging his head and laughing weakly. “He used his firebending to keep those uptight aristocrats safe and I’m still not sure why.”

A spell? Iroh knew of no such thing. Unless the word ‘spell’ wasn’t what Iroh thought? Patience.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

Jet blinked, taken aback. “I mean he cast a spell,” he repeated slowly, eyeing Iroh oddly.

Iroh frowned in confusion. “I’m not sure I understand,” he said hesitantly. “I’ve never heard of a ‘spell.’ What did he do exactly?”

Now Jet was definitely looking at him strangely. “He put a piece of paper covered in doodles on a bridge, said a prayer to… Agni,” he stumbled over the Great Spirit’s name, “and the paper burned up so just the doodles were left. Zenko said it worked so…” He shrugged and studied Iroh’s expression closely. “You really don’t know what I’m talking about, do you.”

Iroh shook his head in wonder. “I do not,” he murmured. “It would appear my nephew is practicing a style of firebending I have never heard of before.” He ran a hand through his beard as he considered the ramifications of this. “He prayed to Agni, you said?” Jet nodded. “I’ll have to ask some friends about this. Perhaps they’ll know more.”


“Most are not,” Iroh said gently. “But some are, yes. Li is a firebender,” Iroh admitted softly, glancing suspiciously at the rooftops in the vicinity, “as am I. We came to Ba Sing Se seeking to escape the war. Believe it or not, not all firebenders support the war.”

“Why?” Jet asked, refusing to meet Iroh’s gaze. “You’re firebenders. You’re Fire Nation. You’re the ones who started this crazy war.”

“Fire Lord Sozin started the war, yes,” Iroh said gently, “just as Fire Lord Azulon continued it and Fire Lord Ozai seeks to win it.” He sighed, feeling the weight of his years and the actions of his youth press against his heart. “I too once fought in the war.” Jet stiffened. “I lost my son to it and decided I would fight no more. Li has never fought in the war.”

Jet scoffed but there was no heat in it. “I’ve fought him Mushi or whatever your name is,” Jet said. “I know he’s a soldier.”

“Not a soldier,” Iroh corrected, “but trained by a soldier. Li was trained to fight and defend himself from a young age. There were many who thought he was too weak for the position he held. More than one tried to kill him. His father included.”
Jet’s head flew up and his eyes were wide with shock. “His… Hisfather?!”

Iroh nodded. “I’m sure you noticed.” He tapped the left side of his face. “That was not the first time Li’s father attempted something so cruel. Li was lucky to have his mother come to his defense the first few times. But luck, it seems, has never kept my nephew company for very long.”

Jet looked like he was going to be sick.

“So you see why I’m glad he does not remember,” Iroh said, bending over to untie the cloth binding the tea set box. “He has everything he always wanted but never had. Who am I to take that from him?”

Kneeling on the cobblestone, he slid the box top open to check the state of the tea set. Whoever had used it hadn’t bothered to clean the teapot and there was still hints of undissolved matcha at the bottom of the whisk and bowl. He clicked his tongue and shook his head. Whoever ordered this and used it clearly didn’t respect the ceremony if they would leave the set in such a dismal state.

“You know about Li’s memory problem,” Jet said suddenly. “Did you know he lost it when he was attacked by a firebender in a ghost town?”

Iroh sat up straight and stared at the young man before him in disbelief. “Attacked by…” A firebender in a ghost town. Azula. Agni, Iroh had been so close to his nephew and he hadn’t known. “I was there,” he murmured. “I too was injured by a firebender. Likely the same firebender who hurt my nephew. But I had help escaping.”

“Yes, well Li didn’t have any help,” Jet snapped, hurt anger sparking in his eyes. “He woke up alone and confused. I can’t.” Jet cut himself off and shook his head. “Who was it?” he demanded instead, glaring at Iroh. “Who attacked him?”

“You would not believe me if I told yo-”

“I know the Avatar?” he cried. His eyes narrowed. “Is that how you met Toph?”

“Iroh nodded. “Li was wanted for a,” he hummed, “shall we say misadventure involving a particularly distasteful Fire Nation admiral, a fortress, and the Avatar. Among other things.”

Jet jolted in shock. “You know the Avatar?” he cried. His eyes narrowed. “Is that how you met Toph?”

“Yes,” Iroh said, nodding. “I met Toph first. We were both alone at the time. I told her I was looking for my nephew and she wished me luck. When next we met, we were fighting for our lives against Azula in the ghost town. Azula had been hunting the Avatar and tracked him there. I was
wounded and, due in no small part to Toph’s insistence, the Avatar and his friends helped me escape. The waterbender Katara,” Jet winced, “is a fine healer. You know her?”

Jet scuffed a foot uncomfortably while Iroh picked up the boxed tea set and stood. “She’s my ex,” he mumbled.

“Oh.” Well then. “It would appear this is a very small world,” Iroh said, offering the young man a wry smile. “She is rather pretty.”

“I guess,” Jet admitted, shrugging awkwardly. “But she’d probably kill me if she ever saw me again. She froze me to a tree last time.”

Despite his best efforts, Iroh chuckled. “I see,” he said.

And yes, that was a small smirk on Jet’s face. Suddenly, Jet tensed and shot Iroh a sharp glance. “Nice try,” he said. “I still want an answer. Why is Li wanted by the Fire Nation? What’d he do? And what does it have to do with the Avatar?”

Ah. Well, it was worth a try. Iroh hummed. “Li never told me the whole story,” he began reluctantly. “But, as I understand it, a Fire Nation admiral captured the Avatar and my nephew broke him out. The admiral put a warrant out for my nephew’s capture, but resorted to attempted murder instead when he discovered his identity. Li and I pretended the attempt succeeded and hid in plain sight. However, when the Fire Nation invaded the North Pole, we were exposed. We escaped, but unbeknownst to us, the Fire Lord himself had issued a warrant for our arrest, authorizing the use of deadly force. The reward is... quite lucrative for certain, interested parties.”


“By helping the Avatar, my nephew committed treason,” Iroh said solemnly. “The punishment for treason is death, without exception.”

“But… The Fire Lord… Li…” Jet’s mouth worked soundlessly as he stared, speechless.

Perhaps a little bit more wouldn’t hurt. “Have you ever heard of the Blue Spirit?” Iroh asked innocently, gathering up the tea set box and hobbling back to the kitchen door. “You should ask Li if he still has his swords and mask. They meant a lot to him. They remind him of his mother.”

Jet said nothing as Iroh stepped back into the warm tea house kitchen. Zuko was checking the teapot on the other side of the kitchen with the fox Spirit perched on his shoulders. At the sound of the door opening, Zuko turned to look, returning his attention to the teapots when he only saw Iroh there.

Something told Iroh this would be yet another long day.
Wave

Chapter Summary

In which Jet processes some revelations and draws a grim conclusion and Shanyuan does not handle wet clothes and crying girls very well.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Couple things:

1) Ancient Chinese compasses used lodestones as their 'needles.' Interestingly, lodestones always point South, not North. So Chinese compasses always pointed South. There were two main types of lodestone compasses that I know of: one that used a lodestone on a bronze plate and one that used an iron needle rubbed by a lodestone set into a piece of wood floating on a bowl of water. In both cases, the lodestone would be allowed to spin freely until it aligned with the Earth's magnetic field and pointed South.

For more info, check out this link: [www.learnchinesehistory.com/history-chinese-compass/](http://www.learnchinesehistory.com/history-chinese-compass/)

2) Just for anyone's curiosity, the illness that Roulan and the Autumn Leaf Clinic healers are dealing with is an outbreak of bacterial gastroenteritis. For reference, Salmonella is a type of gastroenteritis. Basically, everyone has a very bad stomach flu brought on by consuming contaminated food or water. It's spread by consuming the contaminate. It typically lasts for several days and can cause severe dehydration. If the problem isn't dealt with swiftly, death can be the result.

3) The name of the patron Great Spirit of the Air Nomads is Shangdi. He hasn't been referenced directly yet because Aang hasn't had a chance to be in the spotlight and because much of the Air Nomads' practices have been dismissed to history books. The Dai Li are aware of Shangdi and pray to him on occasion, but only on occasion. With very few exceptions, air doesn't have much of a place in Ba Sing Se.

The Blue Spirit. The Blue Spirit. Li was the Blue Spirit! What the fuck? What the shit? Impossible. Impossible! But...

The way Li moved and fought… Jet knew from personal experience that Li’s style of swordsmanship was unique. He was quick and efficient. Jet had no trouble whatsoever picturing the stylized blue and white mask he’d seen on the Blue Spirit’s wanted posters strapped to Li’s face. But that didn’t mean he would have ever thought Li was the Blue Spirit.

And it wasn’t like Jet could ask Li about it either. Clever bastard, that Mushi. Jet tsked and ran his hands over his face and into his hair. He could ask Li if he had the mask and compare it to what he
could remember of the Blue Spirit’s wanted poster, but that’s about it. He’d have to take Mushi’s word for everything else.

Had this been a simple issue like confirming Li’s identity as Mushi’s nephew, then Jet could rely on just the old tea maker’s word. But this was something a bit more complex. Jet would have to find a way to confirm Mushi’s claims the roundabout way. And some of those claims were more than a little out there.

Jet could kind of believe the Fire Princess had attacked Li. As unrealistic as it sounded at first glance, Jet didn’t miss the fact Mushi said that Azula chick had been tracking the Avatar. That was entirely believable. The Fire Nation wanted the Avatar gone. Dead or captured, Jet wasn’t sure. He wasn’t that Spiritual of a person so he wasn’t really sure which option the Fire Nation would prefer.

He did know the Fire Nation wanted the Avatar out of the picture though. Some all-powerful Human who could bend all four elements lashing out at the Fire Nation? Yeah, Jet could absolutely see the Fire Princess herself taking the brat out.

But stopping to kill Li in the process? Mm, not so believable. Huh. Unless there was some mitigating circumstances. Li could have been helping the Avatar again. But Toph said she didn’t meet Li until he was already in Ba Sing Se and she was part of the Avatar’s little clique. Then again, when Toph first met Mushi, they had both been separated from their groups. So maybe Aang and his gang met Li in the ghost town before Toph and Mushi arrived.

But that wasn’t much better either because that meant Aang and his gang knew Li was in the ghost town and left him there alone. Jet may not like Katara or trust her as far as he could throw her, bending aside. But he knew she couldn’t turn her back on someone who needed her help.

She might if she knew Li was Fire Nation and a firebender, however. Yeah, Jet could definitely see that happening. She might have helped Mushi because, while he may be a Fire Nation firebender, he was also an old man. Li was a young Fire Nation firebender who could clearly fight and defend himself. Jet could definitely see Katara leaving an injured Li behind.

But could Aang? Jet plucked out his straw and spat on the ground. Aang was a brat, but he was a brat with a moral lodestone that always pointed South. Jet couldn’t see Aang hurting anyone unless he had no other choice or if it was by accident. Katara could leave Li behind, no question. But could Aang?

Jet had to know. He had to ask. Li wouldn’t know. Mushi clearly didn’t. Toph probably didn’t. Katara would kill him before listening to him and Sokka would probably try to hit him with his stupid boomerang too. Jet groaned. Aang it was then.

Shit.

Shanyuan liked Agent Tengfei. He was patient with the mistakes Shanyuan sometimes made and used every opportunity he could find to teach and train him in better ways to stay safe and do his job effectively. Granted, the older Dai Li agent was a bit odd, but he wasn’t all bad. The things Shanyuan had seen since joining Agent Tengfei on patrol often bordered on the insane. Yet Agent Tengfei handled every situation excellently with calm patience.

But seriously, who in their right mind thought a lemur was a good pet? They were noisy and messy
and mischievous enough to give even the Dai Li a run for their money. It was ridiculous. Shanyuan never felt so humiliated than when he’d been forced to chase after the Avatar’s pet lemur when the thing slipped past their ring of watchers. And, of all places to find the thing, it was sleeping in a giant pothole in a Lower Ring street. Shanyuan hated being dripping wet.

Never. Again.

When he reported the incident to Agent Tengfei, the man had just sighed and rolled his eyes in tolerant annoyance. How did he do it? How did he stay calm all the time? Was it experience? Would Shanyuan ever reach that point? He hoped so.

He had wanted to be a Dai Li since he and his family of merchants first came to Ba Sing Se. Now he could finally live his dream and just the thought of that thrilled him beyond words.

His graduation from an Apprentice Dai Li to a Journeyman was so close Shanyuan could taste it! He would make his family proud. He would make the Grand Secretariat proud. He would make Agent Tengfei proud. But most of all, he wanted to make himself proud. He could do this. He made it this far. He could go the whole way.

Then the Avatar came to Ba Sing Se. Dear Yu Huang have mercy. Shanyuan was so incredibly grateful he and Agent Tengfei had been assigned to the regular Night Patrol and not the Avatar’s watchdogs. Shanyuan barely survived one day observing an area near the Avatar during the Earth King’s party for his pet bear. He didn’t want anything to do with that nonsense.

Then this mysterious Li person appeared with his Knowledge Seeker companion and the nonsense reared its ugly badger-mole head again. At least Shanyuan had trained for events like these to an extent. Hide, observe, report, act.

But something changed. Agent Tengfei changed. Shanyuan knew he was still only an Apprentice so there was no way he knew even remotely everything involved in being a Dai Li, but he knew no Master Dai Li deliberately kept information hidden from their comrades. That was just asking for someone to get hurt. Yet Agent Tengfei had done just that.

Granted, a day off was a day off and Shanyuan was beginning to understand that concept. But it still rubbed him the wrong way. Agent Tengfei should have at least mentioned the incident to someone. The information would have certainly come in handy last night. When the Woman in White appeared…

Shanyuan had seen Spirits before and dealt with them with Agent Tengfei’s help. But there was something about that Woman in White that was just… wrong. Spirits made Shanyuan’s hackles rise and made goose-pig bumps dance across his skin. He knew to expect that and had even experienced it himself several times.

Last night had been different. He’d felt scared. The hairs on the back of his neck rose, goose-pig bumps covered his arms, his legs felt weak, and his entire body felt cold.

Yet through it all, Agent Tengfei had sat next to him like a calm, steady boulder on a rugged mountainside weathering a storm with stubborn ease. Agent Tengfei wouldn’t let anything happen to Shanyuan. If push came to bending, Agent Tengfei would get Shanyuan out of there instead of fight.

He hadn’t needed to, as it turned out. The Woman in White had selected someone else to prey on. Surprise, surprise. It was Li.
Shanyuan knew the moment Agent Tengfei recognized the boy and he’d felt sorry for the Master Dai Li. It was never easy to watch someone they knew suffer at the hands of a Spirit. Women in White were notorious for enticing their victims, whispering in their ears, and luring them to their deaths. Typically, Women in White haunted places near their death site and their victims’ deaths reflected the death of the Human the Woman in White had once been.

The Dai Li knew this Woman in White’s death had something to do with that particular section of the canal. All of the few reported sightings of her were from that general area near the Ba Sing Se University. Perhaps she had once been a student there. The Dai Li had searched for any reports of missing students. Nothing.

It really was difficult looking for reports of missing people when the Dai Li themselves were responsible for many of the missing. Shanyuan wasn’t stupid. He knew what went on underneath Lake Laogai. All Dai Li did. But there was a difference between a missing person and a vanished person.

Although, now that Shanyuan thought about it, perhaps the general public didn’t know the difference. What if they thought anyone who went missing had been deliberately vanished? That would explain why they rarely submitted missing person reports to the authorities. If the person had been vanished, then they were not only unlikely to hear anything but they might even find themselves on the wrong end of an investigation. Better to let dying ostrich-horses lie.

Well damn, that was frustrating.

And now there was an epidemic in the Lower Ring. Shanyuan had a strong stomach most of the time. Burnt remains didn’t count. Particularly when the victims were children. But vomit? Diarrhea? Screaming? Illness? Those Shanyuan could stand with relative ease. He didn’t want to get sick himself, but he could tolerate observing the sick.

The nature of the illness seemed to be a form of the digestive virus. As far as Master Xiu of the Autumn Leaf Clinic and his assistant Roulan could tell, the virus wasn’t being transmitted through contact with the patients’, their fluids, or their various bodily ejections. That, along with the reportedly bloody stools from many of the patients, highly suggested the source was contamination of some sort.

Great. Just what a huge, densely populated city needed. Contamination in the food or water supply. To make matters worse, the Autumn Leaf Clinic was close to the Lower Ring’s restaurant district. Lots of potential sources for contaminated food and water. Too many.

The Dai Li knew this city well, but even they had their limits. They needed a reliable map of the area and more healers. That plus investigating the Woman in White was a lot for one Dai Li pair to handle, even had they both been Masters. Shanyuan still didn’t know why Agent Tengfei had shown interest in this. Another Dai Li pair had already shown interest in the epidemic, but Agent Tengfei had quickly laid claim to it.

Why? What was Shanyuan missing?

And why was the Avatar and his gang not where they should be? Where were they? Where were the Agents assigned to watch them?

Shanyuan crouched by the open window of the Avatar’s home which was typically reserved for visiting dignitaries. There were numerous hidey-holes and listening-holes scattered throughout the house, but it seemed the Avatar’s earthbender had found them all and sealed them. Because of course she did.
Shanyuan hung his head in mounting frustration. This was his first foray alone and he had failed already. What was he supposed to tell Agent Tengfei? That he hadn’t found the Avatar’s waterbending healer? Knowing his partner, Shanyuan could just imagine the man grilling him patiently before giving him a few useful tips and completing the task himself. Agent Tengfei was nothing if not efficient.

No. Shanyuan wouldn’t give up yet. There were still a few places he could look. If the Dai Li agents assigned to watch the Avatar’s group weren’t here, then that meant the Avatar and his friends had wandered off somewhere. It was unlikely that they went to the Lower Ring and there wasn’t much to do in the Upper Ring except people watch or do rich people things. So, maybe, the Middle Ring?

Shaking off his distraction, Shanyuan climbed up onto the roof of the Avatar’s house and looked around to orient himself. Then off he went, racing down the top of the stone wall and leaping from roof to roof, utilizing his iron chains when he had to. Agent Tengfei gave him this assignment. He would succeed.

Plazas, wide walkways, and large, fancy buildings moved past him as he made his way swiftly towards the wall separating the Upper and Middle Rings. His concentration wavered when he noticed a clear ribbon of clear blue snake between a plaza and a row of smaller Upper Ring homes. The canal.

Shanyuan narrowed his eyes. He would have to watch his step here. It may be daylight, but some Spirits were unaffected by the natural ward erected by Agni’s shining face. The Dai Li may not feel particularly affectionate or even kindly towards the patron Great Spirit of the Fire Nation, but they did respect the Great Spirit’s power. Just as the Great Spirit Tui did her best to soothe away the evils of the night brought about by the more malicious Spirits, her power wasn’t as great far away from her mate, the Great Spirit La. Agni, however, stood alone, burning away most malicious Spirits who wandered into his flaming sight.

As the greatest city in the Earth Kingdom, literally surrounded by stone and earth, Ba Sing Se was steeped in the blessings of the Earth Kingdom’s patron Great Spirit, Yu Huang. But although Yu Huang was powerful and as permanent as a Great Spirit’s presence could be, it still didn’t guarantee Ba Sing Se was safe from Spirits brought about by Human malice.

Like a Woman in White.

As servants of Ba Sing Se through their leader the Grand Secretariat, Yu Huang afforded the Dai Li some measure of protection from Spirits and the effects of Human malice. But Yu Huang was still only one Great Spirit and his protection had to spread throughout the entire Earth Kingdom, not just Ba Sing Se. Thus why the Dai Li knew and occasionally requested aid from Tui, La, and more rarely Agni. They needed all the help they could ge-

Was that a wave?

Shanyuan slowed down, stopping abruptly on the last roof before the wall between him and the canal. Yes. Yes that was a wave coming down the canal and Yu Huang have mercy were those people in that wave?!

As fast as he could, Shanyuan hopped to the wall, planting his feet firmly on the stone and jerked both arms upwards and pushed them to the right. A curved wall of rock lifted in the middle of the canal, breaking the oncoming wave and causing the water to slosh up. The three - three? - young girls who had been carried by the wave screamed as the water tossed them up onto the curved stone. Their desperate hands grabbed onto the wet rock, clinging for dear life.
Shanyuan deepened his root into the earth beneath his feet and earth shoes and pushed both hands forward then down. The stone under his control shifted to the other side of the canal where the plaza and planted trees spread out in plain view. Then it slanted down, letting the girls slide down to the plaza’s stone cobbles. Once Shanyuan was certain all of the girls were back on solid ground, he thrust his rock wall back into the earth so the canal could flow freely once more.

Crouching, Shanyuan leapt over the canal, adding a bit of extra thrust from the stone wall. He landed lightly on the cobblestone and began checking the girls for injuries. They were hysterical and clutching at anything they could grab. Their fine Upper Ring dresses were ripped and dirty and their hair was tangled and dripping. They all had bumps and bruises, but two of the girls had scrapes. One of the scrapes was on a face that had been neatly painted. Shanyuan winced. That would likely damage the girl’s reputation and make it difficult to find a suitor.

“Are you alright?” he asked, trying to keep his voice calm and even like Agent Tengfei’s always was.

One of the girls, a dainty young thing with her hair hanging limply around her face and from the dripping wet buns on either side of her head, buried her face in her soaked sleeves. “We didn’t do anything,” she sobbed. Her girlfriends latched onto her and wept into her shoulders. “We were just talking and they dumped us into the canal.”

Shanyuan was sure there was more to it than that, but that wasn’t important at the moment. “Who?” he pressed. “Who dumped you in the water?”

The girl shook her head and wept. “I don’t know,” she moaned. “I didn’t recognize them.”

“How can you remember what they were wearing?” Shanyuan asked.

“That one bitch was wearing blue,” the girl on the left snapped, lifting her head from her friend’s shoulder so her angry tears left trails of black eyeliner down her cheeks. “She made the wave that… that…” She hung her head and sobbed. “I can’t swim!”

The girls’ weeping grew louder and Shanyuan had no idea what to do. Crying girls were terrifying. Hesitantly, he placed a hand on the middle girl’s shoulder in a show of awkward comfort, only for her to cry out and throw herself into his arms and now he couldn’t move what the someonelfixthiswhat?!

Frantically, Shanyuan looked up and scanned the plaza for someone anyone who could take this crying, sopping wet problem from his hands. Two Guards were already rushing over, eyeing Shanyuan warily. As soon as he could, Shanyuan began working himself free of the girl’s grabby hands, placing them on the first hapless Guard who arrived. Free, he stood and stepped back.

He was soaking wet and still hadn’t found the Avatar and his friends. But at least now he had a fairly good idea of where one of them was.

“Take care of them,” he ordered the Guard. “I’ll handle the waterbender who did this.”

The blood drained from the Guard’s face but he nodded. Shanyuan didn’t wait for a reply. He crouched and forced the earth to punch him back to the stone wall. From there, he darted over the roofs towards the canal bridge the wave had come from.

It didn’t take long. He slid to a stop on the wooden beam at the top of a roof by the road and looked down. Sure enough, there was the Avatar’s waterbending teacher and shit his earthbending teacher was there too. Shanyuan really needed some luck right now.
Yu Huang, these people hurt citizens of Ba Sing Se, citizens he and the Dai Li lived to protect. Give him the courage to do what he had to.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Shanyuan leapt down to the street below, cushioning his landing by softening the earth and rooting his chi firmly and deeply in place. Standing, he tucked his hands in his sleeves, fingerling the iron chains hidden there, and tilted his head just enough so his hat shaded his young face from full view.

The waterbender immediately froze and stepped back, her hand flying to her side. There was nothing there now, but judging by her disgruntled expression, there was usually something there. Probably a waterskin or something similar. The Avatar’s earthbender didn’t move so much as cock her head to the side and adjust her footing.

To be honest, it was the Avatar’s earthbender Shanyuan feared the most out of these two. He knew what a waterbender could do. He did not know what a blind earthbender could do. The Avatar had chosen this earthbending girl to teach him. That had to mean something.

Besides, Shanyuan was proof enough that appearances were deceiving. Without his Dai Li uniform, he was just a simple merchant’s son from the Middle Ring. Nothing special. Aside from being a Dai Li.

He stood still and waited, watching. The waterbender seemed confused by his inaction. The young earthbender, however, frowned.

“What do you want?” the waterbender demanded impatiently.

Shanyuan tilted his head up slightly and eyed her. “You do realize most people in Ba Sing Se don’t know how to swim, right?” he said dryly.

The earthbender’s blind eyes widened in dawning understanding. Good. She could probably sympathize.

The waterbender grit her teeth. “What does that have to do with— **Ow!**” she cried, jerking away from the earthbender’s fist. “Toph! What was that for?”

“He’s right,” Toph said grimly. “We’re in a city, Katara. How many of these people do you think have ever seen water in something big enough to swim in?”

Katara huffed. “They have the canal,” she argued, pointing back at the bridge.

Really?

“You don’t actually think people go swimming in a canal, do you?” Toph said with just the right amount of disdain in her voice to satisfy Shanyuan.

Katara straightened and flushed shyly, rubbing her neck in embarrassment. Although, the blush could have been due to her fresh makeup. Come to think of it, both Katara and Toph were wearing makeup. The Fancy Lady Day Spa wasn’t far from here. Did they come from there?

“I- I guess not,” Katara admitted. “But the canal wasn’t **that** deep,” she huffed, crossing her arms in annoyance. “They didn’t have to send you after us,” she added, shooting Shanyuan the evil eye.

He’d seen worse.

“One of them has a scrape on her face,” Shanyuan said, watching the blood drain from Toph’s face
as he spoke. She understood the gravity of the situation. “And they were all injured and terrified.”

“They were bullying us,” Katara argued viciously.

Shanyuan tilted his head and adopted his best Agent Tengfei Voice of Disappointment. “And that makes bullying them back alright?”

The waterbender looked ready to let loose a biting remark before she thought better of it and held her peace. Wise choice.

“Normally, what you did is punishable by a night in prison at the very least,” Shanyuan said, keeping his voice calm and even despite the waterbender’s gasp of outrage. It really was chilly out with his clothes still wet. “But seeing as you’re the Avatar’s friends,” and the fact Long Feng wouldn’t be pleased if Shanyuan overstepped his authority and arrested anyone from the Avatar’s group without prior permission, “I suggest an alternative.”

“What kind of punishment is that?” Katara cried angrily. “We didn’t do anything seriou-

“We’re listening,” Toph interrupted, holding up a hand to stop the waterbender’s word vomit.

Good. “There’s a situation in the Lower Ring,” Shanyuan said. “An illness.” The waterbender tensed, straightening as the anger on her face quickly became worry. “There currently aren’t enough healers at the clinic to handle the number of patients while we find the source of the illness.”

Katara eyed him warily, then glanced at Toph. The earthbender tilted her head thoughtfully before nodding. With a sigh, Katara nodded.

“I’ll help,” Katara said eagerly. “I need to get my canteen of water back at the house, but I’ll help.”

“I’m coming too,” Toph said. “I’ve got a friend down there I was going to check on this afternoon anyway.”

A friend?

“You know someone in the Lower Ring?” Katara asked in surprise. That surprise quickly morphed into sly amusement. “Is it your secret friend from the library?”

That blush on Toph’s cheeks definitely wasn’t from the makeup. “He’s not a secret,” the earthbender huffed, crossing her arms and striding towards Shanyuan with Katara by her side.

“Right,” Katara drawled as Shanyuan fell into step behind the girls. “You just refuse to tell us his name,” she teased, tossing her long braid over her shoulder coquettishly.

Shanyuan tried not to roll his eyes as he listened to them banter. Boys. Not the best topic to talk about in front of him. Awkward.

“Well, yeah,” Toph said, shrugging. “I’m allowed to have my secrets. You know, like you and Sokka and Aang keep secrets.”

“We don’t have any secrets,” Katara said, looking at Toph incredulously.

“Huh.” Toph said. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the waterbender snapped. “Toph, we don’t have any secrets. I promise.”
Toph held up a finger. “You promise,” she said in a flat voice. “Like Aang promised Wan Shi Tong he wouldn’t steal from his library but did anyway?”

Shanyuan may have tripped.

“That kind of promise?” Toph continued. “Cause if so, I’m not interested.”

Katara was positively gobsmacked and Shanyuan was suddenly even more certain he wanted to be as far away from the Avatar as possible right now. He had to tell Agent Tengfei. He had to tell the Dai Li and Long Feng. They needed to know.

A broken promise to a Spirit was never good. It just begged malice to take root. They had enough on their plates right now as it was. They didn’t need any more bad luck right now.

Yu Huang, Tui, hell Agni too if the Great Spirit of Fire was listening to an Earth Kingdom Dai Li, don’t let Ba Sing Se suffer for another’s crimes.

…

The sky bison aside.

Shit.
Water

Chapter Summary

In which Li makes an emergency run with Jin, meets a new friend, and avoids another friends and not-so-friendly... friends.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Ok. I meant to post this on Thursday but I crashed early due to sheer exhaustion. Then I tried again on Friday, even adding more to it, but ended up running a fever due to allergies running amok so bad even my meds couldn't help me. I'm still loopy on allergy meds now but I'm getting this up so I don't have to worry about it.

That said, sorry about my loopy self and enjoy this chapter written while high on allergy meds.

There were so many customers! Li was frantically trying to take down all of the orders while Pao brewed the tea in the kitchen. Of all days for Mushi to take off, this was not the best choice. Granted, it had been lazy and slow earlier in the day. But everything changed when the lunch rush began.

Once it began, it hadn’t stopped. Customers were streaming in and staying! This was not normal. Zenko had taken to sticking close to Li, either sitting on his shoulders or lounging on the top shelf of the cabinets lining the wall between the common area and the kitchen, as he worked. The tea house was very close to capacity and Pao was seriously muttering about kicking people out or cutting off the incoming customers. Li sincerely hoped he would. The sheer number of people in the tea house talking and not leaving was getting to him. He could barely hear people when they ordered unless they yelled.

Blessedly, Pao had made the decision to limit their menu from the usual full menu. They were only serving sencha, chamomile, ginger, ginseng, and oolong now. They simply didn’t have the manpower and time to brew the entire list of teas they typically served.

Li needed a break. He hadn’t mentioned it, but he knew Pao knew. Li also knew Pao needed a break. Too bad they weren’t going to get one anytime soon. Not unless some miracle happened.

Heaving a sigh, Li made his way through the crowd to the newest customer standing at the bar since all of the tables were full. The man sat with his shoulders hunched and his gaze cast down at the wooden serving bar. Hurrying from the last table he’d taken orders from, Li stepped back behind the bar and breathed a sigh of relief. Safe. Ish.

“Hello. Can I get you anything?” he asked, pitching his voice so it was audible over the rumble of the crowd.

The man lifted his gaze to Li’s face, his dark brown almost black eyes widening in shock when
they saw the scar. Li leaned back and dipped his head self-consciously as the man continued to stare at him.

“Can I get you anything?” Li asked again.

The man visibly shook himself, jerking his gaze from the scar to Li’s undamaged pale gold eye. “Y-yes, a lemongrass tea, please,” he said.

“We aren’t brewing that right now,” Li said, shaking his head regretfully. “We’re only serving sencha, chamomile, oolong, ginseng, and gi-”

“Ginseng, then,” the man said, his gaze flickering to Li’s scar once more. “Please.”

Swallowing back the hurt and annoyance boiling just below the surface, Li nodded and turned away to write down the order. Most of the customers who came to Pao’s Tea House these days were regulars who were familiar with Li’s scar. The many newcomers today were… not familiar with it. Li was finding himself the subject of many stares and awkward questions. He should be used to this.

“Hey Li.”

He looked up and relaxed somewhat. Jin never stared or whispered. She just smiled and looked at both of his eyes without fear or judgment, just kindness.

“Jin,” he said in greeting, moving away from the depressed man to where Jin waited at the other end of the bar. “I’ll get you a ginger tea.”

“Thanks,” she said smiling. “But I was actually wondering how you were doing.” At his confusion, her smiled softened. “I heard what happened yesterday. I’m so sorry.”

Oh. Li shrugged and dropped his gaze. “It… Thanks,” he said. “I can’t talk long ‘cause we’re a bit busy but thank you.” He gave her a tired smile. “I’m… I’m better.”

Her smile brightened, then turned devious. “And your date with Jet?” she teased. “How did that go?”

It was a little warm in here. Yes. A lot of people, small space, lots of heat. Warm. And now Jin was laughing at him. Spirits, Li really needed to learn how to hide his emotions. Agni, some help please.

Several soft thumps heralded the light arrival of Zenko. Well, she wasn’t Agni but she would do. And that swat from her tails was definitely deliberate. The fox Spirit sniffed, trotted across the countertop and sat in front of Jin chirping expectantly. Li scoffed but Jin brightened considerably and petted Zenko’s fluffy cheek fur.

“You’re still gorgeous, pretty girl,” Jin cooed to the fox Spirit. She looked up at Li and smirked, covering her girlish giggles with a polite hand. “Wow. Roulan was right. You do blush easily, Li.”

Li stared at Jin, dumbstruck. Even Zenko was making her gekkering laugh again. He felt so betrayed. Jin laughed harder and patted his hand fondly.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to tell me,” she said, reaching up to scratch the fur under Zenko’s chin. “I’ll just ask Jet when he comes in later. I’m sure he’ll be more than ready to gush about his boyfriend.”
Sadness settled in Li’s chest, pulling his mood down with it. “I’m not so sure he’ll be coming in today,” he said shyly. “…I think he’s avoiding me.”


“I just…” Li shrugged and avoided her gaze. “We just decided to take it slow.”

Zenko moved away from Jin and pushed her head into Li’s chest, nuzzling and warbling soothingly. Jin’s light brown eyes however were thoughtful and curious.

“Did he push you too hard?” she asked. “Or try anything? Or…”

Li shook his head. “No. No, nothing like that,” he reassured her. “I just-”

“Li!” Pao called from the kitchen.

“Yes!” Li hollered back.

Instead of yelling, Pao burst out of the kitchen wide eyed and frantic. “We need more water!” he declared. “Li, I need you to go get some more water as fast as you can.”

Stunned, Li hurried to the doorway to the kitchen and looked around. “We’re… out of water?” he gasped. “But there are still orders to fill and-”

“I’m handling that,” Pao said urgently, “but I can’t make any more tea after this batch until we have more water. The two buckets are by the door and, for Yu Huang’s sake, be quick.”

“I’ll help!” Jin announced, startling the two tea house workers. “I can carry a bucket by myself.”

“That’s not necessary, young lady,” Pao said, waving his hand placatingly.

“But three buckets are better than two, right?” Jin argued. She lifted a finger to halt Pao’s reply. “You can count it as me paying for my ginseng tea.”

Pao shut his mouth and nodded. “You’ve got a deal,” he said. He darted back into the kitchen, emerging with another bucket. This one was smaller than the two buckets by the back door, but it would do its job. “Hurry back,” he commanded.

Li didn’t wait. He ducked down and scooped up the two buckets and hurried out the back door, snatching a carrying pole leaning against the wall as he went. He waited for Jin and Zenko to slip out the door behind him before making his way out from beside the tea house to the main road. There were more patrons lingering outside the tea house.

Agni, the nearest well was several blocks over near the middle of the restaurant district. It would take time to get there, fill their buckets, and hurry back. Hopefully, there wouldn’t be anyone already using the well. If Li had to wait in line for the well, it would take longer and make the possibility of Pao biting his nails again that much more realistic.

“Why are there so many people here today?” he grumbled, hurrying down the road at a pace Jin could keep up with. He knew he could go faster, but it would be rude to leave the girl behind. Especially when she had offered to help him. Besides, Zenko was already leading the way.

“They’re avoiding the other restaurants in this district,” Jin said between breaths as she ran next to Li. “A lot of people have been getting sick over the past two days. It got bad enough for the Guard and even the Dai Li to get involved.”
“What? How do you know that?” he demanded.

Jin shot him a look. “I know just about everything that goes on around here,” she declared proudly. “The Dai Li think the illness is due to bad food from one of the restaurants. The Guard has already shut down two that I know of for sure.”

Damn. “No one at the tea house is sick yet,” he muttered worriedly.

“Yet,” Jin agreed.

Oh Agni, don’t jinx it.

They rounded a corner and hurried to the well in the center of the plaza. Li groaned when he saw someone already at the well. Zenko bounded over and hopped up onto the well’s rim and swished her tails as she gazed down at the dark water below. Li and Jin slowed down as they approached the well and waited for the young woman already there to finish filling her second bucket.

“Little Tang?” Jin called.

Startled, the girl shook her chin length light brown hair out of her sweaty face and looked up. “Jin?” she gasped, rubbing her sleep-deprived eyes with her arm. “What’re you doing here?”

The girl, Little Tang, looked thoroughly exhausted like she hadn’t slept the night before. Looping the handles of her buckets onto her carrying pole, she knelt and slipped her shoulder under the center of the pole. But she could barely make it up from her crouch before wobbling tiredly and falling back to her knees.

Jin dropped her own bucket and knelt down to rest a hand on the other girl’s shoulder. “Hey, are you okay?” she asked. “Do you need some help?”

The girl shook her head negatively and tried to stand once more. Then slowly, reluctantly, she nodded. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “I’m fine. Just stood up too fast. It happens sometimes when I pull an all-nighter.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jin said, setting her bucket down by Li’s feet. “Li, can you fill this up for me? I’ll be right back.”

Well, there wasn’t much Jin could do while Li was filling up the buckets anyway. He shrugged and nodded. Why was Jin looking at him like that? He hesitated, staring at her. Jin looked down at the other girl’s full buckets then back up at Li. Um… What? Jin raised both of her light brown eyebrows and… Oh. Oh!

“I got it,” Li said, giving Jin a disgruntled look. Honestly, if she wanted him to take the bucket she could have just said so. Was that really so hard? How was he supposed to know?

He set his own empty buckets down by the side of the well and easily shouldered the other girl’s carrying pole. He waited for the buckets to stop swinging precariously before looking back at the new girl.

“Thank you,” the girl said, standing and rubbing her neck and shoulders. “This way,” she said, waving for Li to follow her down the road.

Li shot Jin another dry look which she returned by shamelessly blowing him a kiss and waving. Li flushed in shock and turned away, grumbling under his breath. If this took too long, Pao was going to kill him. He sighed and followed the girl, accepting his inevitable fate.
Zenko hopped down from the well and trotted over to Li, batting his leg with her tails. She was good company. Maybe she could—Wait. No. Zenko, no! What? Why?

Li stiffened when the fox Spirit ignored his mental pleas for her not to and climbed up his body to perch prettily on the carrying pole. He staggered and shifted his weight as Zenko’s added weight caused the carrying pole to tilt too far to the left. When the pole stopped wobbling crazily, Li glared at the fox Spirit in annoyance and followed after the girl with a huff.

“Thank you again,” the girl said. “Even though I know your friend volunteered you,” she added with a shrewd glance. She stumbled in surprise when she saw Zenko sitting on the carrying pole perfectly balanced and grinning her foxy grin. “Oh.”

Well used to the reactions Zenko so often drew, Li just rolled his eyes and shrugged. Or he tried to anyway. It wasn’t easy to shrug with a carry pole and two full buckets of water on one shoulder.

“Not much of a talker, are you?” the girl teased, her eyes flicking to his face before returning to Zenko.

Li grimaced. “I don’t know you,” he said.

Instead of being offended, the girl rubbed her shoulders and upper back with a wince and stretched. “I don’t know you either,” she said.

Point.

“Really, though,” she said after a moment as they turned a corner. “Thank you. I’ve been doing that all night.” She rolled her shoulders again and popped her knuckles.

“Why?” Li asked. Then he noticed the building in front of him and his eyes widened. How had he not noticed? “Do you work here?” he asked.

The girl nodded. “It’s probably best if you don’t come inside,” she said. “There’s not a lot of room and I don’t want you to get sick, too.”

“Is Roulan working today?” Li asked.

The girl looked up at him in surprise. “You know Roulan?” When Li nodded, the girl’s entire demeanor softened. “I’m Tang Rou. I’m an Apprentice here.”

“Li,” Li replied simply. Zenko barked at him and he rolled his eyes and fought down a snicker. “Tell Roulan Zenko looks forward to winning money off her at Mah Jong again,” he said, kneeling down by the clinic’s outer wall.

Tang giggled while Li set the buckets on the ground, but her laughter quickly became a yawn. “Thank you again for the help,” she said, reaching for the nearest bucket.

The water sloshed over the full bucket’s rim, splashing Li’s hand. It felt… wrong. Before he could actually stop and think about his actions, Li snatched the bucket’s rim so the water brushed his fingers again. There. It was there. Just like the wrong in the slop on the ferry had been there. He couldn’t explain it. He just knew. He could feel the Fire inside him yearn to burn away the wrong, erase it from existence. He was this close to letting it do just that when—

“Li?!”

It felt like something had physically grabbed him and jerked him back to the here and now. Li
blinked, momentarily confused and looked up at the owner of the voice in surprise.

“Roulan?” he said, staring up at the older healer. Zenko nudged him with her damp nose and warbled at the healer.

The healer noticed the fox Spirit and immediately crossed her arms and stared down at Zenko with disdain. “You already took my winnings from me, fox,” she said. “Don’t try your cute tactics on me.”

Zenko chirped and wagged her tails with a foxy grin.

Li rolled his eyes. “Ignore her,” he said to the healer, earning him a swift smack from kitsune tails. “Sorry. I- Um.” How to say this. “Look, you should boil the water,” he said, nodding to the buckets of water. “It’s... wrong.”

“We always boil the water before using it,” Roulan said in clipped tones. When Zenko flicked her ears and tilted her head curiously at the water, Roulan’s gaze hardened. The healer frowned and stared warily at Li. “Although,” she added mildly, “I don’t think we’ll have to boil that one.”

What? No. He’d been in control. He’d been in control!

Terrified of what he might see, Li dropping his pale gold gaze to the water still moving over and around his fingers. Nothing. It was cool. Not steaming. But... But then why-?

“Master Xiu needs that water for his bending,” Roulan continued, kneeling by the bucket held by the Apprentice healer and Li. She tested it with her own fingers before nodding in satisfaction and shaking her fingers dry. “He prefers to work with cold water,” she continued. “It’s easier for him to bend during the day.”

That made sense. But why the wary look from before?

“Little Tang, take the other bucket in and help GuoGuo with the clean up,” Roulan said, taking the bucket handle in hand and standing. Her gaze lingered on Li’s fingers which still hadn’t released their grip from the bucket’s rim.

Tang Rou slid the carrying pole out from under the remaining bucket and leaned it against the clinic’s outer wall before picking up the bucket and taking it inside with her. Without looking at the Apprentice healer halfway through the clinic’s front door, Roulan frowned.

“Oh, and make sure Master Xiu is still napping,” the older healer said dryly. “If he isn’t, I’ll make him regret it. Agent Shanyuan should be back soon with another waterbending healer to help.”

“Thank Yu Huang,” the Apprentice grumbled. With one last curious glance at Li and shy wave at the kitsune, she nodded a farewell and went inside.

“I thought you were working today, Li,” Roulan said, deliberately tugging the bucket Li’s hand still gripped.

“I am still working,” Li said, flushing self-consciously. He forced his fingers to let go of the bucket in Roulan’s hands and stood. “You really should boil that water.”


“It’s wrong.”
Informative but uninformative. Li bit his cheek and shifted under the healer’s sharp gaze. Agni, was she still waiting for an answer? Li did answer.

“Wrong how?” Roulan pressed, her expression darkening suspiciously.

What was he supposed to say to that?! That the water felt like something that made his inner Fire want to burn away the wrongness until it steamed? That it felt like something slimy touched his skin and he wanted nothing more than to burn it from existence? That it felt like the slop from the ferry?

“Just… trust me,” he said finally. “Boil it. Boil any water you get from that well.”

He didn’t stay for any more questions. He didn’t want to answer them. He couldn’t answer them truthfully. Not in a way Roulan would understand and not reveal his secret as a firebender.

Besides, he couldn’t leave Jin waiting for him by the well or Pao alone in the tea house with so many customers and no Mushi there to take some of the pressure off. Li ran a hand over his face and waited for Zenko to jump up onto his shoulders. When he felt her four paws grip the fabric of his tunic and her tails wrap around his neck, he ran back down the street.

The fox Spirit’s fur brushed his unscarred cheek as he rounded the corner and crossed the plaza to the well. He had to wait in mounting frustration as a cabbage salesman pushed his cart in front of him before continuing.

“Sorry about that,” he muttered to Jin as took the bucket she’d just finished filling from her hands.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said with a friendly smile. “I only just finished filling the buckets. Besides, Little Tang needs to get out of that clinic and you need to breathe and make friends beyond your boyfriend,” -oh Agni why?/- “a fox,” -Zenko was laughing at him now/- “tea house employees,” -just stop/- “an uptight healer,” -fine, he accepted his fate/- “and me.”

“I have enough friends,” Li groaned.

He slipped the carrying pole through the handles of the two largest buckets and shoved his left shoulder under it. It was a bit difficult to ignore Jin’s merry laughter and Zenko’s gekkering as he did so but he managed. He probably had sunburn on his face though.

Yes. Sunburn.

Getting to his feet, he adjusted his footing so he was balanced, making sure the carrying pole didn’t bump anything. He stepped to the side so Jin could pick up her slightly smaller bucket, and looked up when a flash of dark emerald green in the corner of his unscarred eye caught his attention.

Looking around Zenko’s dark fur curiously, Li paled and immediately dropped to the ground so the stone rim of the well hid him from view.

“Li?!?” Jin cried, shocked. “Wha-”

He yanked her down next to him, splashing some of the water in her bucket onto the two of them. He grimaced, instinctively trying to get away from the wrongness there.

“What’s going on?” Jin demanded.

“Long story,” Li said. He turned and peeked over the rim of the well with Jin. “Short version? I’d rather not be seen by him.”
He saw the moment Jin caught sight of the Dai Li walking past. She instantly ducked lower so only her eyes peered over the stone. Zenko, however, seemed to have no fear of the situation, much to Li’s chagrin. The fox Spirit hopped off Li’s shoulder onto the well’s stone ledge and sat there staring at the Dai Li and growling low in her throat.

Stunned and more than a little bewildered, Li followed Zenko’s gaze to the other people walking with the Dai Li and Agni how had he missed them before?

“Agni, why?!?” he cursed under his breath.

“He could be going to the clinic,” Jin whispered. “We know the Dai Li have been-”

“Not him,” Li corrected quickly. “Well, him too. But I’m talking about them.” He nodded at the two girls walking just behind the Dai Li. Toph he would enjoy talking to again, but not the girl in blue walking next to her.

“Oh.” Jin glanced at him with a sly smirk on her face. “An ex?” she teased.

“Not mine,” Li said grimly, meeting Jin’s eyes. He saw his friend’s face pale in understanding.

“Which one?” Jin asked seriously, looking back over the well at the two girls.

“The one in blue,” Li answered readily, following Jin’s gaze. “Her name’s Katara. She’s a waterbender.”

Jin stiffened and grabbed Li’s arm in an iron grip. “Li,” she whispered urgently. “We’re by water!”

Oh. Shit.
Recognition

Chapter Summary

In which Toph tries to mitigate but ends up helping to cause a crisis and Li's future is foggy.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Ok. Sorry for the delay. I'm presenting my thesis proposal defense this Thursday and I am freaking out! I suck at public speaking but I have to somehow present 30 pages worth of dense science into a 25 minute powerpoint presentation in front of my thesis committee and whoever else decides to show up. It's open to anyone. ...no pressure. I don't want anyone to show up. I'm scared enough as it is.

There is another A/N at the end of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Toph would recognize that balanced toe-heel-toe-heel stride anywhere. She made it a point of pride to remember the feet of the people she liked. Well, those she hated too, but that was because she had to. Not because she wanted to. She wanted to remember Li.

So when she felt Li’s distinctive pattern of walking, she grinned. She wanted to yell a loud ‘hello’ but she wasn’t stupid. She doubted Li would appreciate the attention of the Dai Li leading her and Katara to that healing clinic.

Besides, she was still a little self-conscious about how she looked. She knew how the makeup felt on her face but she had no idea how it looked. Katara said it was beautiful and Toph believed her. Katara hadn’t lied. But she was still a little worried. Just a tiny, tiny amount. After all, the makeup made her feel like she was back at home with her family.

Okay, so maybe she was a little homesick too.

Hey. Wait a second. Why was Li so scared? She could feel his feet shaking minutely against the ground. Then he rolled his weight up onto the balls of his feet, two round things thumped to the ground behind him and in front of him, as he dropped to his knees. She could feel his hands pressing against the stone rim of a hole in the ground filled with nothing. A well probably. What was he doing?

“I’m just gonna get a drink of water,” she said, stretching her arms and turning towards the hole in the ground where Li was. “Don’t wait up for me.”

She could feel the Dai Li’s weight shift his earthshod feet towards her. “Uh- But-” Wow. He really did sound young.

“Are you sure?” Katara asked in genuine concern. It would have been sweet had Toph actually
needed someone to hold her hand. It was still a little bit sweet, but Toph would never admit that out loud.

“Don’t worry, Sweetness,” Toph said, flashing a grin in Katara’s general direction. “I’ll find you again just like I always do.” She shrugged. “I know how you walk. It’s very distinct.”

“But, what if the clinic is far away?” she asked. Toph could feel Katara’s worry in the way the waterbender’s adjusted her weight from the balls of her feet to a more flat-footed stance.

“It isn’t,” the Dai Li, said. “It’s just around the corner.”

His stance was balanced and ready, as if expecting something. Just because, Toph bent a pebble up from the ground behind the Dai Li and dropped it so it made a soft thunk on his head. Oh, that sounded like it hit a hat. Cool. She bit back a smirk when she felt the Dai Li rock back on his heels to stare up and look around for wherever the rock that hit his hat had fallen from. She could enjoy this game.

“Oh, okay then,” Katara said. She still sounded unsure, but she wasn’t arguing anymore. “If you’re sure.”

Katara swayed on her feet slightly almost like she did when bending. That meant she was probably waving. Toph snickered. Katara. Waving. She made a very unladylike snort.

Ooh, had that Dai Li just jumped a bit? Huh. He obviously hadn’t been expecting her to do that. Well then, guess she’d better keep this up. This could be fun. She let out a belch just cause and yep, the Dai Li was inching away from her and that was Katara’s put-upon sigh. So much fun.

Too bad she’d have to wait to tease the Dai Li a bit more. Right now, she had someone else to tease. She twitched her toes and grinned when she heard a familiar squawk and felt Li flinch back from the rim of the well.

“Hiya!” she called when she was knew Katara and that Dai Li were far enough away. “You suck at hiding.”

“You hit me with a rock!”

She snickered. “Uh, duh. What else would I use?” she teased, propping her fists on her hips and walking around the well to face Li and his friend.

“You could not hit me at all,” Li groaned, turning his feet slightly so he was facing her. “That would be nice.”

The other person with him giggled and Toph grinned. “So Li, who’s your friend?” she asked. “Sounds like she’s got a nice sense of humor.”

Li weight moved to one side as if he was leaning around Toph to look at something before heaving a sigh of relief and standing. His friend also stood and stepped around him.

“Hi. I’m Jin,” the girl said. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Toph,” she replied, nodding slightly. “‘Sup.”

Li swayed minutely. “She’s blind, Jin,” he whispered. “She can’t see your hand.”

Oh. Was Jin waiting for a handshake or something? Why did people always do that?
“Huh? Oh goodness! I’m sorry,” Jin said hurriedly.

Here we go. Toph braced herself for the typical show of regret for her lack of sight.

“Are you Li’s friend?” Jin asked, drawing out Li’s name in a teasing manner. “Li? You have a friend outside of the tea house?” A dull thump of a hand hitting a chest. “I’m shocked.”

“Shut up!” Li cried, flinching away from Jin’s feet.

Well, this is new. Toph liked this Jin girl.

“I’m so proud,” Jin drawled.

“I will hurt you,” Li muttered, crouching and lifting the two round things by him, probably buckets. Toph felt his feet press harder against the ground as he stood, adjusting his stance so the extra weight was balanced.

Four dainty paws danced on the stone rim of the well then their owner let loose a spine-chilling yowl. Before Toph could properly react, she found herself with an armful of kitsune and faceful of fur. She wasn’t complaining. She laughed as Zenko made warbling and cackling sounds that were very similar to laughter. It always felt good to be missed.

“Hey there, Zenko,” Toph said, petting the kitsune as the Spirit stood on her shoulders and slobbered all over her cheek. “I didn’t forget you.” Wait. She took a deep breath of that fur and winced. “You stink.”

The fox Spirit yelped and immediately jumped off Toph’s shoulders and bounded over to Jin who was wobbling on her feet from laughing so hard. Even Li was snickering.

“Yeah, she does need a bath,” Li said. “Jet helped her pick out some nice scented soap last night. I was going to wash her this afternoon during my break but the tea house has been so busy all-Flaming monkeyfeathers!” Li bounced up to the balls of his feet. “We have to get back there,” he said frantically.

Li’s feet bobbed anxiously, caught between the desire to dash off with his buckets of water and stay here and talk. Zenko’s paws batted the ground by his feet, clearly wanting him to stay.

“Oh! I completely forgot!” Jin gasped. Her weight increased when she lifted another bucket off the well’s stone ledge.

“Hey! Wait!” Toph complained, stomping her foot to get a better idea of where everything was just in case she needed to run after them. “Is Uncle there today?” she demanded.

“No,” Li said, slowly inching away from the well as the need to get back to work overtook his desire to stay. “He took the day off. It’s just me and Pao. Since the Guard started shutting some of the restaurants, we’ve been bu-”

“Toph! Toph! Don’t drink the water!”

Katara? Why was she back? Toph could hear the fear in her friend’s voice and feel the extra spring in Katara’s steps as she ran towards them. Toph could also feel the spike in Li’s heartbeat through his feet and the instant bounce up to the balls of his feet, ready to run.

“What?” Toph called back to the waterbender. “What’s wrong?”
“Don’t drink the water!” Katara repeated. “I just heard. Healer Roulan thinks the well may be the source of the illness. You can’t dri- You!”

Now that was the fastest Toph could ever remember hearing Katara’s voice change from fear to hate. She felt Li flinch. His muscles tensed as he jerked higher onto the balls of his feet and took a wary step back. Toph could feel his pulse hammering through his feet like a baby bird’s frantic, untested wings.

“What are you doing here?!” Katara demanded. The usual gentle sway of her footsteps morphing into the vicious riptide of her battle stances. “Get away from Toph!”

“What’s going on?” Jin cried, stepping closer to Li’s side. “We haven’t done anything.”

“Get away from him!” Katara shouted and there was the fear again. It was tinged with anger, but it was definitely fear.

“I-It’s okay,” Li said as calmly as he could. His voice shook about as badly as the muscles in his feet, but he carefully took one step away from Toph, then another. “I’m sorry we had to meet like this,” he said. “I’ll keep my distance, I promise.”

“Will someone explain to the blind person what the heck is going on here?” Toph snapped, gritting her teeth as she tried to keep up with the racing emotions and subtle twitches in her friends’ feet.

“He’s Fire Nation,” Katara hissed angrily.

And yes, that was definitely a spike in Li’s heartbeat. The boy was up on the balls of his feet and leaning away, ready to flee.

“No he’s not,” Jin shouted. “He’s a waiter at a tea shop.”

“I don’t know what he’s told you, but it’s a lie,” Katara said, the faintest hint of desperation audible in her voice. She was telling the truth. “He’s Fire Nation. He’s been hunting my friends for almost a year.”

Toph gulped. Truth. Katara was telling the truth. But then-

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Li said, taking a wary step back. He sounded genuinely scared and… He was telling the truth too. But they couldn’t both be telling the truth! How was that possible?

“Shut up!” Katara shouted and swayed-

Toph felt Li twist on his feet, knocking Jin to the ground and putting most of his weight on his right foot as if to turn and run away. But he didn’t get the chance. Toph heard him make an aborted cry of fear and nearly lose his balance, his heartbeat pounding a frantic rhythm though his feet as four paws danced after him-

:Li!

Then he was still. Perfectly still. The ground around his feet was freezing cold and heavy with a weight that hadn’t been there a second ago. She could still feel Li’s heartbeat through the earth. It was racing so fast and yet, strangely, muffled. Li made no sound. The ball of his right foot, the only one still securely on the ground, was slowly growing colder.

“Let him go!” Jin shrieked, scrambling to her feet and pounding on… something. “Let him go!
You’ll kill him!”

“I won’t kill him,” Katara said, striding towards where Toph stood frozen in shock. “Even though he deserves it.”

“He didn’t do anything!” Jin cried, her tears crystal clear in her voice. “He can’t breathe like that! Let him go! Li!”

Shaking, Toph reached out, feeling the air where Li and the heavy, cold thing was. Ice. It was ice. Li was encased in ice. How-?! Where did Katara possibly get enough water to-

The well.

Toph could feel Li’s muffled heartbeat stuttering as his foot grew colder and colder. She couldn’t feel or hear Zenko at all. She couldn’t risk breaking the ice with her earthbending. She couldn’t ‘see’ the ice clearly enough to determine where it would make a clean break or where it would shatter. She didn’t want to hurt Li.

But he was Fire Nation. Katara hadn’t been lying when she said Li had been chasing her. Who was it that Katara and Sokka talked so much about? That Fire Nation prince who kept trying to capture Aang? The guy who was Uncle’s nephew?

“His name’s not Li,” Katara said, coming to stand next to Toph. “His name is Zuko and he’s Fire Nation. I’m sorry Toph.”

She was. Toph could feel it. But Li’s heartbeat was getting fainter and he was so cold and Li was so shy! He couldn’t possibly be some fearsome Fire Nation prince. Toph beat him at Mah Jong just yesterday. He’d been nice and couldn’t take dirty jokes and was so much fun to tease and-

“He needs to breathe,” Toph whispered, pressing her hands against the cold. She twitched her toes, feeling for Li’s fading pulse. She had to tune out Jin’s screaming to do so. “He’ll suffocate if he can’t breathe.”

Katara sighed. “I can’t,” she said seriously. “Last time I left his face uncovered, he melted my ice, attacked me, and kidnapped Aang. Honestly,” she said with a slight hint of reluctant pride, “I doubt Zuko even knows how to die. I’ll go get the Dai Li. Make sure he doesn’t go anywhere.”

“Let him go!” Jin shouted, all hot fury and fear.

Toph was too busy focusing on counting the seconds between Li’s heartbeats that she missed the distinctive way Jin shifted her weight. She did not miss the sharp sound of flesh slapping flesh and Katara’s cry of shocked pain.

“Just because he’s dating your ex doesn’t mean you can treat him this way,” Jin snarled. “He never did anything to you. Let him go.”

“My ex?” Katara gasped in confusion. “I don’t have an-” She shook. “I’m going to get the Dai Li. If you want him to live, then I need to hurry.”

“Actually,” Toph chimed in, her chest squeezing in fear and wary relief as she pointed somewhere behind Katara, “looks like someone else beat you to it. They’re coming now. I’d know those earth shoes anywhere.”

Hang on Li. This is all just a misunderstanding. Toph had felt the truth in Li’s feet, but she’d also felt it in Katara’s feet. They were both being honest. It made no sense!
Cold! He couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe! It was so cold! His skin was burning where the ice touched him, which was everywhere. He’d known Katara was a waterbender, but he’d assumed she’d use the water in the buckets to bend at him. Not the water from inside the well too!

His nerves were crawling with the wrongness imprisoned in the water-turned-ice. His inner Fire blazed, but didn’t do much else. He needed to melt to ice. He needed to bend. He needed to breathe!

Breathe. Firebending was in the breath. Without air, there was no fire. Without breath, there was no Fire.

Li could feel his pulse pounding in his ears, drowning out the muffled murmur of voices just on the other side of his frozen prison. He was panicking. He had to calm down and think.

Breathe.

He couldn’t.

The panic spiraled back to the forefront of his mind and he forced it back again. He could hold his breath for a while. Not much longer. But a few more seconds at least.

Feel.

He couldn’t close his eyes to aid his concentration because the ice prison froze them open. But he could still feel his chi pulsing in his stomach, feeding on his heartbeat and the air left in his veins. Slipping a tendril of chi to his foot where he could still feel dirt, he sensed heat.

The further his chi reached, the more heat he found. Sunlight warmed rock and dirt below him, warm spring air around him, warmth in the core of his body, and even faint warmth in the ice encasing him.

If he could reach those heat sources and breathe-

He couldn’t breathe!

:Fire. You’ve come back to me.: 

Terror! That wasn’t Zenko in his mind. This voice was dangerous and alluring and impossible! She couldn’t be here. She couldn’t! She had died in the Middle Ring not the Lower. She could. Not. Be. Here.

:Water flows where it will, little Fire,: the spirit whispered in his air-deprived mind. :You can come with it.: 

He was running low on time. He was getting dizzy and so, so cold. It felt like he was on fire. He was burning alive and the spirit was-

:It’s scary at first.: 

Don’t listen to her.

:But then the fear goes away and there’s just you and the water.:
Don’t listen to her!

:It’s quiet, calm, peaceful.: 

He didn’t want to die. He’d made a deal. Made a promise! He had to keep it.

:We could be a matched set, you and I.: Arms that weren’t there but he could feel looped around his shoulders. :The two of us. Scarred by someone we trusted,:-

No.

:-attacked when we were vulnerable.: 

Grab the heat from the rock, air, people, himself.

:You would think I’m pretty.: 

Pull it all into his core, as much as he could, so dark, dizzy, cold, hurt-

:Because you know my pain.: 

-and pushed it all outward as fast and hard as he could.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: For anyone wondering, Katara is not necessarily acting wrongly here. She's acting rashly, yes, but not wrongly. She's acting on the information she has: Li is Zuko, Zuko has hunted her and her, Aang, and her brother since the South Pole the year before, has repeatedly hurt her and tried to capture Aang, participated in the invasion of the North Pole, etc. From her standpoint, Zuko is the enemy. She has no reason to believe otherwise.

In short, don't hate Katara.
Jet stared at the door with all the pent up emotion swirling inside him. If Jet was a firebender, the door would be covered in soot. This was stupid. This was beyond stupid. He shouldn’t be here. He wasn’t wanted here. He didn’t want to be here. He had to be here. He had to know.

Sucking in a deep breath through his nose, he flicked his tongue over his straw for good luck, breathed out, and pounded his fist on the door.

Nothing.

He knocked again.

Still nothing.

He pounded a third time, kicking the door for good measure.

Still. Nothing.

“Avatar!” he shouted at the closed door. “Open up, Avatar. You and I need to talk.”

Okay. He’d been expecting to be whiplashed with water for that by now. If that hadn’t happened, then that meant Katara and Sokka weren’t here. Toph wasn’t here either because she may be blind, but Jet had no doubt she would know him with those weirdly impressive feet of hers. To make matter worse, that big sky bison wasn’t chewing on the grass behind the house, he didn’t hear the tell-tale chirrup of that weird lemur thing, and there was no sound coming from behind the doors. The Avatar was many things, but quiet wasn’t typically one of them.

So the place was empty then. Great. Fantast. Jet went out of his way to stop by the Avatar’s place on his way back to report to Quon after a delivery and no one was home. Fabulous.

His head thunked against the wooden door in frustrated exhaustion. Here he’d gone and revved himself up to fight or run for his life and… Nothing. He was practically tingling with excess energy with nowhere the channel it and he still had to talk to Aang. Damn.

Well, no help for it. He had things to do and standing here lazing like a rock was not one of those things. He had to get going. He still had a few more things on his to-do list of deliveries to
complete before he reported back to Quon and got paid for the day.

Strolling down the stairs from the front porch, Jet pulled his straw out of his mouth and toyed with it while he thought about how best to get to his next pickup location. First thing’s first, he had to get out of the Upper Ring. Lower Ring citizens weren’t allowed up here.

Jet had some leeway since he was delivery boy and he had to get places for quick pickup and delivery on the job. He had one free pass into the Upper Ring given to him by Quon, but that was it. And he was saving that for a special occasion.

It really was surprising how lax security was up here. He only had to ‘borrow’ a nicer robe to wear over his usual clothes and follow after a highborn family at just the right distance with his head down and everyone only saw a servant of an aristocratic household. He’d have to return the robe. Maybe. It was silky and not exactly Jet’s style, but it got him in here. He might need it again. Better keep it just in case. Yeah.

He tucked his hands in his sleeves like Li often did and walked away from the Avatar’s house, careful to keep his head respectfully down. There were fewer Guards up here and there was so much space! That one perfectly manicured yard over there could hold almost the whole restaurant district near the Lower Ring’s artisan district. And that pond was bigger than Jet’s shared apartment. Rich people really were something else.

He approached the train station calmly, keeping his stride even and purposeful. He belonged here. He was a servant on an errand for his master. Nothing more. Nothing interesting. Ignore him.

The Guards at the train station ignored him. But Jet didn’t drop his act. This wasn’t his first time under cover. He’d seen too many amateurs undercover drop their act once they were out of sight. He’d trained his kids, his Freedom Fighters, to never fall for that trap. He used to have nightmares of the younger kids getting caught and suffering the same fate as those amateurs.

It was when people weren’t looking that the unseen eyes were looking. They were the ones to fool, not the eyes you could see.

So he kept up his act. Waiting in respectful silence until all of the aristocrats had boarded the train first before stepping inside himself and standing in a corner. He held his act firmly in place until after he stepped off the train in the Middle Ring and slipped between two buildings. Then he shed his borrowed robe, looked around warily, and… hung it back up on the same clothes line strung between the buildings he’d snitched it from.

Man, that hurt to do. He could think of so many uses for that robe. Walk away, Jet. He left that life behind. Mostly. Don’t fall back now. Think of Li. If Jet got caught for petty theft, he’d be forced to stay away from Li. That was unacceptable. As if Jet would do anything to keep him away from that hot body and addicting personality. He was playing Li for keeps.

With a groan, Jet turned on his heel and strode back out of the narrow alley and made his way across the Middle Ring to another train station. This one was a bit further away from his home district, but the extra walk was a small price to pay for remaining unnoticed. Besides, he liked walking. He just preferred to do it under the shade of trees and to the sound of birds singing, not in the shade of buildings to the sound of noise.

At least it was a pretty day, if a bit cloudy. There might be some rain later this afternoon. Digging out the list of items still on his list, Jet grinned. Almost completely finished and the day was only half over. Nice. He might just pop in on a certain waiter and sneak a kiss.
Li was a firebender.

Deep breath. Li may be a firebender, but he was also Li. Jet was nuts for Li. He wasn’t nuts about the firebending part, but he’d be interested in experimenting. Besides, with his kink for water, he could just imagine Li accidentally heating the water while Jet pounded him into-

The ground was shaking. Why was the ground shaking? Since when did the ground fucking shake?!

“Look out!”

A powerful gust of air flew past him in a flash of orange and yellow. Was that-

It was. Oh shit.

Jet dove for the nearest doorway and pressed his back against the wooden door as a stampede of wild fucking animals thundered past him. One overly enthusiastic pygmy puma bounded up onto the wall of the building Jet was pressing himself against to avoid a rabbiroo and one of its paws hit his gut and-

Ugh! Couldn’t breathe! Couldn’t. Breathe. Shit. Damn. Fuck. Ow. What the-

He sank down to the ground clutching his spasming stomach as his lungs seized. He couldn’t breathe. Calm down, Jet. Small breaths. Shallow. Small. Quick. Let the pain fade at its own pace. On the plus side, most of the animals were gone now. On the downside, so was the Avatar.

Damn it. He’d been this close to Aang and the kid had literally blown right past him followed by a stampede. Only Aang.

Getting to his feet, Jet wobbled for a second. Drawing a breath as deeply as his still smarting gut would allow, he relaxed. His fingers twitched, toying with his empty belt loops where he preferred to keep his hook swords. That was the worst part about Ba Sing Se. He couldn’t risk carrying his swords around everywhere unless he was ready for a fight.

Damn.

At least he knew where the Avatar was now. Sort of. The trail was definitely obvious. Sucking it up, he picked up his feet and started jogging after the stampede. In the distance, the Inner Wall loomed. Why was Aang leading that stampede towards the Wall? Walls don’t just… open.

Unless there are a bunch of earthbenders on the Wall. And apparently, there were earthbenders on the Inner Wall because it split apart from top to bottom, moved backwards, then slid aside. Jet picked up his pace, as did the throng of people who had joined him in following the Avatar. Not like a stampede could be kept a secret, after all.

It took a while and Jet was a bit surprised how winded he was when he finally reached the Inner Wall. He was getting out of practice. He’d need to do a few rooftop runs after his workout with Li for the next few nights.

Wow. The Agrarian Ring was more like it. Green. Green and gold and patched with planted crops and a few copse of trees. With the midday sun shining down on the miles of fields, Jet finally felt… calm.

And then the throngs of people following the Avatar raced past him and the earth roared once more. Flinching and instinctively reaching for his swords which weren’t there, Jet stared at the
source of the rumble and woah. So the kid learned earthbending.

Wait. Why was Aang earthbending in the Agrarian Ring? Didn’t he know that- What- Was that… Was that a zoo? Did the Avatar just rip up a section of the Agrarian Ring and all those crops which would be used to feed the people of Ba Sing Se to build a fucking zoo?!

He did. Fuck Jet sideways, Aang actually did it.

Jet wasn’t sure whether to be amused or horrified. He settled for incredulous laughter because what else was he supposed to do? Apparently, he wasn’t the only one stunned by the torn up and reallocated land use of the five farms that were now a zoo. Jet winced. Whoever owned those farms would not be happy when they found out about this.

At least the kids were enjoying the changes. Dozens of children who had been drawn by the commotion crowded and cheered excitedly as they ran passed Jet. He watched them weave through the concerned and confused adults to gawk at the new zoo full of animals.

Jet shook his head. Of course. He’d forgotten. Aang might be the Avatar, but he was still only twelve years old. What twelve year old not born an aristocrat was expected to understand how land use and allocation worked? Also, Aang was a monk. Did monks even have personal property?

...had?

Twelve years old and no adult to teach him. Wow. That must be lonely.

“Jet?”

Startled, Jet turned around to find an out of breath Smellerbee and Longshot. His friends’ eyes were wide and their cheeks were flushed from running here. Zoo. Oh! Had this been the zoo ‘Bee and Longshot had been working at? No way.

Jet blinked slowly in comprehension. “Let me guess,” he drawled, tucking his hands in his pockets and wishing he had a straw to flick with his tongue. He must have lost it when that pygmy puma stomped on him. “Aang showed up at the zoo and wanted to help out.”

‘Bee chuckled breathlessly and even Longshot’s lips twitched upwards.

“How’d you know?” ‘Bee teased, her brown eyes staring out at the new zoo, impressed. “It’s certainly bigger than the other one.”

“It’s gonna cost, though,” Jet muttered just loud enough for his friends to hear. “Think he knows?”

Smellerbee shook her head. “I doubt it,” she said just as softly. “I don’t think it even occurred to him.”

Jet sighed. He’d been afraid of that. It made sense, but that didn’t make it better. He wasn’t surprised.

“That kid’s got a bleeding heart the size of the entire Fire Nation,” he grumbled. “See something in pain, must fix.”

He sighed and watched the children running from pen to pen. They looked happy. Yu Huang knew how much of a morale boost happy children were to poor, downtrodden refugees.

“I’m impressed,” he admitted after a moment. “I am. I just…”
“You grew up faster than we did,” ‘Bee said, touching his elbow. “You had to. You were the parent we all lost.”

Jet pressing his lips together in a grim line.

“Aang doesn’t have that,” ‘Bee continued. “He might need one.”

Was that a not-so-subtle suggestion?

Jet nudged Smellerbee lightly with his arm, shaking her small hand off. Then, just because he could, he rested his arm on her head and leaned. Not surprisingly, she grunted in offense and stepped out from under him. Jet laughed and held up his hands defensively against his friend’s playful fists.

Longshot was definitely smiling now too. It was small, but it was there. Jet made sure to smack Longshot’s shoulder lightly enough to be playful. Maybe the day was looking up after all. He had his friends and he found the Avatar. He still wasn’t fully okay with Li being a firebender, but he was absolutely okay with Li. They could work through this.

He would just prefer it if he could work through this with Li by his side. He made a mental note to stop by the tea shop this evening when it closed and talk to the cute waiter. If he played his tiles right, Jet might just get a kiss or two or three out of it.

With that thought fully formed in his head, Jet strode out into the Agrarian Ring towards the newly built zoo with his friends to talk to the Avatar. This really was turning into a good day. Hopefully Li was having an equally good day.

---

So cold. He could barely move. At least he’d finally started shivering. When the Spirit who had once been the Woman in White whispered in his mind, he’d wavered. Only for a moment. He shuddered from a cold that wasn’t physical and winced.

His muscles were starting to cramp up from the near constant shivering. It was making it difficult to breathe. Everything hurt. Everything burned. He couldn’t feel his fingers or his toes or his ears or his nose. But at least he was sitting down.

...what?

Opening his eyes, he waited for his blurred vision to clear up. It took a bit longer than he thought was normal. He sighed, his breath stuttering in time with his shivers. He was soaking wet. What had happened?

Katara. She’d seen him. She’d attacked him. Froze him in ice!

She’d known he was Fire Nation. Worse, she’d announced it. In public. Loudly. So everyone could hear. That was a death sentence.

But he wasn’t dead. He was in too much pain to be dead. So then where…?

He groaned when he forced his stiff muscles to sit up and lean back against the chair he sat in so he could lift his head. It was dark. His vision was still blurry at the edges, but he could just make out a person in green standing a fair distance from him wreathed in a soft, golden glow. A lantern?
“Awake, are we?”

Who?

Li stiffened, jerking his arms- His arm couldn’t move. Something cool, hard, and unforgiving encased his hands, holding them captive behind his back. The uncomfortable chair back was wedged between his shackled hands and his back. What was that holding his hands? It felt like… hands. But Li couldn’t think of anyone who had hands that were as rough and cool and hard as the ones squeezing his own, crushing his fingers. No wonder he couldn’t feel his them.

He jerked his legs and felt his heart skip a beat when he felt the same inhuman hands gripping his shins, pinning them securely to the chair legs. He was a prisoner.

No. No! He couldn’t die here. He couldn’t! He’d made a deal with Wan Shi Tong. He’d given his word. He couldn’t break it. He had to protect Zenko. He had to-

Zenko. Where was Zenko?!

“Begin.”

Gloved hands made of the same cool, unforgiving material that held his hands and legs in place gripping either side of his head and yanked his face up so he looked straight ahead. Terrified, Li’s gaze flicked side to side, hoping to find an exit, a friendly face, and explanation, something!

The light was moving. How was it moving? Why would someone put a lantern on a wheel and turn it? Who was that standing in the middle? It was too dark.

“There is no war in Ba Sing Se.”

“Wha- What?” he gasped. “What are you talking about?”

The light moved, faster now, ‘round and around.

“Here, you are safe.”

What? No he wasn’t! Where even was he?

“Where am I?” he breathed, feeling fear spike through his veins as he tried to look away. Zenko! Agni! “What’s going on?”

The grip on his face tightened so it bordered on pain and held him so his gaze stayed forward.

“What’re you…” he struggled against the grip, “doing?!”

Two fingers -stone fingers?!- moved up his right cheek and spread open his good eye so he couldn’t close it or blink. No.

“Here, you are safe.”

No. “No, I’m not!” he cried, struggling harder.

“Here, you are safe.”

He wasn’t. The Woman in White. She found him. Katara found him. He was captured. He was most definitely not safe!
So bright, so dim, bright, dim, bright, dim. Why? Agni was so far away. Above and far away and that hurt in his heart, his chi.

“What is it you fear?”

“You.”

“Do not fear me.”

Li jerked and the grip tightened yet again, this time it did hurt. He whined when a stone finger dug into his scar. It felt weird. Painful. Weird. Bright. Dim.

“What else do you fear?”

Himself. And… “Woman in White.”

“You fear her?”

“She found me.” So bright. His eye was so dry. He needed to blink. Dim. Bright. "In the water.”

“Found you? You speak as if she sought you out.”


“Here, you are safe.”

“No. I’m…”

“Here, you are safe. She sought you out.”

“She said…” What did she say? Bright. Dim. Blink. Need. “We’d be… a matched set.”

“How so?”


“Here, you are safe.”

“…no…”

“You are safe.”

“Scared…” She’d been scared too. But then- “…then quiet…peace…” There was something there. Something… important… Bright. Wrong. Dim. "The water.”

“Here, you are safe.”

Ying. Hope. Than.

“Someone… I trusted…”

“Who?”

“…I… don’t know…”

“Who? You are safe.”
Bright. Dim.

“Who?”

“She’s not... “

“She?”

Bright. Wrong. Stop. Dim.

“Not a ... Woman... in White...”

“Here, you are safe. Tell me.”

“...scar... We’d be... a matched set.”

She said so. Bright. Wrong. Dim.

“Do you think she’s pretty?”

“Pretty? Who?”

He needed to... tell them... warn them... 

“Who is pretty?”

He twitched, gulped. Bright. “Don’t... look at her...”

“Who?”

“Speak... only truth.”

“To whom? You are safe. Speak.”

Had to... warn... 

“Don’t answer her.”


“Why not?”

“Zenko.”

...help...

“Who?”


“Ask... Wan... Ssshi... To...”

Jet.

Sorry.
Interrogation

Chapter Summary

In which Long Feng has some questions that have answers he never expected.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I wrote almost all of this last night, but I lost Internet so I couldn't post it. And I wanted to keep my usual schedule of late evening/night posting, so I waited to upload this until now. I spent the day chilling, doing laundry, and writing the net chapter which is now complete and waiting to be posted tomorrow night. ^_^

Long Feng stepped out of the interrogation room and nodded to Agent Guotin in the hallway. "She knows nothing," he said, nodding to the entranced girl in the cell. He gestured and bent stone door shut behind him. "Remove her memory of the questioning and have one of the Joo Dees escort her back to the Lower Ring."

"Yes sir." Guotin nodded to one of the two Dai Li agents standing guard outside the girl's cell and the moved to fulfill the Grand Secretariat's orders. "Will you be going to the firebender's cell now?" Agent Guotin asked, falling into step beside his leader.

Long Feng hummed an affirmative as they strode down the hall to the other interrogation chamber. He nodded a greeting to the two Dai Li agents guarding the door. They bent it open and Long Feng stepped inside followed closely by Agent Guotin.

Young. That was the first thing he noticed when he looked at the firebender. He had been expecting a young man, perhaps a new recruit in the Fire Nation's army or a spy. Now, looking at the young face that stared in his general direction with empty golden eyes, Long Feng began to question that theory.

“How deep is he?” he asked.

The boy's Fire Nation eyes were dull and void of emotion, blinking lazily in the lantern lit interrogation cell. Long Feng had many questions he urgently needed answers to. If the prisoner’s mind was bent too thoroughly, he would be useless for everything but looks and simple errands. If it wasn't bent enough, the prisoner could break free. It had happened in the past with the precious few Fire Nation soldiers captured from beyond the Outer Wall. Long Feng did not want to lose this opportunity to carelessness.

“He can hear you,” Agent Guotin answered promptly, studying the prisoner with deceptively mild interest, “and he can respond. But I can’t take him any deeper without running the risk of losing him.”

“Understood.” Straightening, Long Feng nodded in approval. “Anything of interest to report before we begin?”
The Dai Li agent tilted his head thoughtfully. “A few things actually. There was more resistance
than I expected from someone as young as he is,” he said. “It was as if something else was fighting
my suggestions.”

Long Feng lifted an eyebrow in patient expectation. He was intrigued to note the hesitancy in
Agent Guotin’s face. Most curious.

“Also, I believe he has spoken with the Woman in White,” the agent said cautiously.

Stunned, Long Feng clasped his hands behind his back and stared at the docile prisoner with
newfound interest, thinking on his agent’s words. Encountered and interacted with the Woman in
White and lived to talk about it. The Spirit bitch had now claimed the life of one Master Dai Li and
the mental clarity of a Journeyman Dai Li. A simple Woman in White should not pose such a threat
to his expert comrades.

Yet this one did and continued to do so. It was almost as if she was mocking them. She would pay.
Long Feng would ensure the murderous Spirit paid for her crimes against his people, his city, and
his comrades.

“What did he say about her?” Long Feng said urgently.

“I… think he was trying to warn me,” the agent said, choosing his words carefully.

Long Feng’s eyes narrowed. “Warn or threaten?” he said,

“Warn,” Agent Guotin confirmed. “His words were broken and scattered, but it seemed like he was
telling me not to look at her.”

exactly?” he asked, studying the prisoner’s young face. That scar…

“He warned me not to look at her,” the Dai Li said, “to speak only truth, and not to answer her.
Then he asked me if I thought she was pretty.”

“Strange.” A firebender in the process of being mindbent attempting to warn his captors of danger.
“Very strange.” He mulled over his agent’s words before nodding for Guotin to continue his report.

“He spoke of someone named Zenko,” Guotin said.

“A Fire Nation name.” The Grand Secretariat’s green eyes flashed back to the silent prisoner. “A
cohort? The Woman in White’s true name, perhaps?”

But the agent shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said slowly. “When I asked, he told me to ‘Ask
Wan Shi Tong.’”

Wan Shi Tong. He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things. The Knowledge Spirit was notorious for
choosing the life of a hermit, locking himself away in his hidden library and devoting himself to
learning. The owl had no interest in the goings-on of the mortal world unless it was to be learned
and studied from a purely objective point of view. He horded his knowledge and was generally
peaceful when he and his house of Knowledge Seekers were left alone.

Why would a Human boy, a firebender, mention the name of the venerated Knowledge Spirit?
Who was this Zenko?

“Thank you,” he said, acknowledging his agent’s honesty. “Boy,” Long Feng said, studying every
minute twitch of the prisoner’s scarred face. “What is your name?”

“I don’t know.”

Calm, monotone, truth. Impossible.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” the Grand Secretariat demanded in a calm voice. “What is your name?”

“I don’t remember it,” the boy replied.

Don’t remember? He found that hard to believe. And yet-

“He cannot lie like this, correct?” he asked, tilting his head to Agent Guotin without removing his eyes from the boy.

Agent Guotin nodded. “Correct.”

Long Feng hummed. “Why don’t you remember?”

Vacant gold eyes remained dim and staring as their owner spoke. “I don’t remember anything from before a month ago.”

Truth. Damn. There went Long Feng’s opportunity to grill a firebender on anything useful about the Fire Nation. But it did bring up some rather intriguing questions.

“What could make a young firebender like you lose your memories?” Long Feng asked. “It seems rather unrealistic.”

The answer was simple. “I was attacked by a firebender.”

Simple yet entirely unexpected. Infighting in the Fire Nation ranks? From what Long Feng understood, honor duels such as the Agni Kai were a rare but respected occurrence amongst Fire Nation forces. But this boy was too young to be a soldier in active duty. A runner perhaps? A spy? A messenger? Or one of those damnable hawkers in charge of passing messages between Fire Nation troops?

A moot point. No memories. Nothing useful there. Very well. On to the next subject of interest.

“Then what are you called, boy?” Long Feng asked the prisoner patiently.

“I am called ‘Li,’” the prisoner replied readily.

“You are a firebender,” the Grand Secretariat said. “Is that not so?”

“It is.” No spark of defiance or fear. Nothing. Just the flat stare of no one home.

Long Feng narrowed his eyes. “Then what were you doing in my city?” he demanded, biting back the venom that wanted to worm its way into his voice. It would do him no good here.

“Living,” the prisoner replied. “Working-”

“Where?” Long Feng interrupted. “And doing what?”

“Pao’s Family Tea Shop in the Lower Ring,” the prisoner replied. “I’m a waiter there.”
“Why there?” Long Feng pressed.

“I suck at pottery.”

Long Feng blinked. That reply was almost sarcastic. Fascinating. Pottery…

“Are you aware of the murder of two young children by cremation in a kiln in the potter’s complex?” he asked.

“I am.”

Forest green eyes narrowed viciously. “Are you the one responsible for the deaths of those children?” he said in a calm tone, fury and hate carefully banked behind a mountainside of self-control.

“No.”...what?

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

But you’re a firebender. “Then where were you when the crime was committed and how did you learn of it?” he demanded.

“Sleeping with my family,” the prisoner answered. “The guildmaster’s son came to be sure one of the children wasn’t Hope-”

“Who is Hope?” And what kind of name is that?

“My…”

Hesitation. Why? How?

“…adopted cousin.”

Ah. Adoption. Fire Nation adopted by Earth Kingdom. There could be something useful there. Food for thought.


“He brought me to the complex and asked me to remove the heat from the kiln.”

What? So the the man knew, or at least suspected this boy Li was a firebender. And kept silent.

“The guildmaster’s son. What is his name?” Perhaps the Dai Li could reach out to his man. Depending on where this guildmaster’s son’s loyalty belonged, such a characteristic could be useful.

“His name is Cheng.”

Long Feng glanced at Agent Guotin who nodded. That name would be remembered. “Continue,” he said.
“I tried to remove the heat slowly,” the prisoner explained, “but the Guard and the Dai Li arrived before I could finish. So I had to pull it all out at once.” Was that emotion in the boy’s eyes? “I wasn’t fast enough.”

“I see,” Long Feng murmured, studying the odd flickers of emotion in those pale Fire Nation gold eyes.

“That would explain Agent Tengfei’s report,” Agent Guotin murmured, drawing his leader’s gaze. “Both Tengfei and his Apprentice Shanyuan noted the signs of thermal shock.” The Dai Li’s hazel eyes slid back to the prisoner’s docile form. “They thought a waterbender was the cause.”

Ah. Extreme heat cooled too fast. Yes. Long Feng could see how that mistake could be made. But be that as it way, he still needed to know.

“Do you know who was responsible for the children’s deaths?” he asked.

“No,” the prisoner said. “But I hope they suffer.”

Anger. So deeply rooted. How was it slipping through? “Why?” Long Feng asked, honestly curious.

Pain and a tear? It seemed Fire could widdle away a mindbent trance more efficiently than an earthbender or waterbender. Idly, he wondered if rooster-pig-headed airbenders would be as successful.

“They cannot rest,” the prison said, the unscarred eye softening minutely at the corners. “They’re still there. By the kiln. I see them in the morning and evening. They’ll fade soon.”

Who? Oh. Yu Huang be merciful. The children’s spirits were still there. And this boy knew the spirits when he saw them. He was a Natural then. If only he wasn’t a firebender. Long Feng would have jumped at the chance to induct the boy into the ranks of Apprentice Dai Li. Naturals were so hard to come by.

Speaking of Spirits.

“I understand you have met the Woman in White,” he said. “Did she entice you?”

Was that a grimace? The Grand Secretariat would have to do some research into the strength of a firebender’s inner Fire. If so much emotion could slip through a mindbent trance, shallow though this one may be, then it raised the question of how deep a firebender would need to be induced to be deemed sufficiently ‘safe.’ Long Feng would not risk exposing his people to the dangers of a raging, fearful firebender half free from a mindbent trance.

This was his city, his people. He had taken an oath to protect them. If the Earth King chose to seclude himself to his hobbies and not actively pursue the protection and state of Ba Sing Se, then as the Grand Secretariat, it was Long Feng’s duty to do so. Ba Sing Se was his home. He would die before he saw it fall.

“She did,” the prisoner said.

Unfaithful then. If someone couldn’t be trusted to remain loyal to their own romantic partner, then how could they be trusted with espiona-

“But she isn’t a Woman in White anymore.”
Truth. But how? Spirits are constant. They don’t change. It isn’t in their nature. A Woman in White is a Woman in White. A female ghost who preys on the unfaithful partners of romantic relationships. She is the spider waiting patiently in her masterfully crafted web. She haunts near the place of her death and entices her victims so they come to her. She does not come to them.

For a Spirit as well-defined and unchanging as that to change… Surely there must be a mistake.

Dumbfounded, Long Feng glanced at an equally shocked Agent Guotin. Feeling gnawing fear begin to crawl up his throat, Long Feng focused his full attention on the firebender. “Explain,” he commanded harshly.

“She may have started as a Woman in White,” the boy answered promptly, “but she’s been corrupted. I don’t know what she is anymore. But she found me.”

“You’re implying she was looking for you specifically,” Long Feng said slowly. “That she chooses her victims rather than taking any unfaithful fool who falls to her wiles.”

“She hunts,” the prisoner confirmed. “She seeks out her prey through the water.”

Long Feng frowned. “The canal where she died is in the Middle Ring,” he murmured. “How could she have…” Then again, the Dai Li never could find her body. “Agent Guotin.”

The Dai Li agent by his side stiffened, adopting an alert stance. “Sir?”

“Have one of the Dai Li bring me a map of the underground waterways of Ba Sing Se,” Long Feng commanded. “I want to know if the canal that runs by the Ba Sing Se University joins up with that well in the Lower Ring.”

“Yes sir,” the agent said, bowing respectfully. “Do you have someone specific in mind?”

The Grand Secretariat returned his gaze to the still mindbent boy and considered the offer. “I understand Agent Tengfei has been assigned to watch the canal for the former Woman in White.”

“He was, sir,” Guotin said, straightening and tucking his hands in his sleeves. “He’s currently handling the epidemic in the Lower Ring.”

Mm, yes. Long Feng nodded. The mysterious illness, caused by contamination from the well water. There is no such thing as coincidence.

“Bring his Apprentice, then,” he said. “I want to know if his report matches the prisoner’s.”

“Not Tengfei, sir?” Guotin asked quietly.

“I will hear Agent Tengfei’s report later,” Long Feng said, soothing his agent’s suspicion. “Besides, as an Apprentice, Shanyuan must observe and learn from every branch of the Dai Li’s duties. This will be his first report given on his own, but it will hardly be the last. Best to start somewhere.”

“Of course, sir.”

Without another word, Agent Guotin bent the stone cell door open and relayed Long Feng’s orders to the Dai Li standing guard outside. Long Feng waited patiently until Guotin returned. The agent was one of the most senior in the Dai Li and had earned Long Feng’s trust. Just as Long Feng had earned Agent Guotin’s unwavering trust.
“What else can you tell me of the former Woman in White?” Long Feng asked the prisoner when Guotin resumed his position at the Grand Secretariat's side. “Do you know her true name?”

The boy blinked mildly. “No, I don’t,” he said. “I have never seen her face up close.”

“But you have seen her face,” Dear Yu Huang, say yes. Give the Dai Li something specific to look for.

The prisoner nodded and Long Feng released a sigh of relief. “Describe her.”

“She has black hair hanging loose except for a jade hairpiece,” the boy said. “Her eyes are green and her mouth is… fuzzy.”

...fuzzy? “Explain.”

“It didn’t…” The boy’s good eye flashed briefly with emotion before squinting as if trying to draw up a muddled memory. Curious. “It wasn’t clear,” he said finally. “Like I was looking at it through fog.”

“There was fog when my agents arrived and captured you in the Lower Ring,” Long Feng said. “Was that the first time you saw her face?”

“No. I first saw her by the canal in the Middle Ring,” the boy replied. “It was raining. I knew what she was. Even if I hadn’t, Zenko has sharp claws.”

That name again. Claws. “This Zenko,” Long Feng said, “you say she has claws. What is she?”

“A Knowledge Seeker of Wan Shi Tong.”

“And why would a mere Human boy know a Knowledge Seeker's name?”

“She gave it to me,” the boy said. “She is under my protection.”

Long Feng’s eyebrows flew up in disbelief. “Knowledge Seekers are members of Wan Shi Tong’s house,” he said incredulously. “They answer to no Human and prefer the company of books and scrolls to mortal chatter. How could a fox Spirit submit herself to the pathetic protection offered by a mere Human boy?”

“It’s part of my deal with Wan Shi Tong.”

...impossible…

“You have a deal with He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things?” Agent Guotin gasped.

“I do.”

Damn and damn. A deal with a Spirit. Those were hard to come by and notoriously hard to complete. Despite that, Spirits held deals in high regard. They rarely handed them out and when they did, they took personal offense when someone, including the person they made their deal with, attempted to renege on the agreement. Yet somehow, this firebending boy had managed to secure a deal with Wan Shi Tong himself and retain the aid and services of a Knowledge Seeker.

“And where is this Zenko now?” Long Feng asked, wary of the answer.

“The Spirit hunting me was there, in the ice and the fog. She was coming for Zenko. I couldn’t protect her,” the boy said softly. “So I banished her back to Wan Shi Tong’s library.”
Spirits have mercy. The boy knew how to banish a Spirit. A partially trained, firebending Natural had been dropped in Long Feng's lap. This was either a perfect opportunity or a deadly trap. He would need to tread carefully.

"If I gave you the freedom to roam," Long Feng asked slowly, "do you think you could find the former Woman in White?"

"I won't have to," the prisoner said. "She'll find me."

And he was here, surrounded by Spiritually sensitive Dai Li, underneath Lake Laogai, hunted by a murderous Spirit who traveled through... water.

The boy blinked and looked up at the stone ceiling, without being commanded. "She's here," he whispered. "I can hear her."

"Damn!"
Malevolent Origin

Chapter Summary

In which Spirits discuss Spirits, Professor Zei gives some insight into Human nature, and confirms that there is indeed nothing like a mother's wrath.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I meant to write Jet's interactions with Aang for this chapter, but the Spirits talked too much. Talkative nerds. So I guess Jet and Aang will return in the next chapter. And yes, I'm sure Katara and Toph will as well. Perhaps a few others too. It's been a while since we spoke to Ying and Than, after all~

She was in shock. It had all happened so fast. She hadn’t had time to react. She had tried to get Li out of the way, but she hadn’t been fast enough. Instead of running or fighting back like she tried to get him to do, the boy had turned and pushed that Human girl out of the way of the deluge of water. It likely saved Jin’s life.

But Jin wasn’t Zenko’s responsibility. Only Li held that honor. Zenko had tried to leap at Li and knock him aside, but she’d been swept up in the waterbender’s ice wave as well. Zenko was a Spirit in flesh. She could survive a waterbender’s ice, but Li was a firebender. Water, ice was Fire’s elemental opposite in the bending cycle. Surrounded by his opposing element with no way to breathe, bend, or escape, Li would have succumbed.

Then Zenko felt the malevolence. Li was right. That Spirit was not a Woman in White. Perhaps she had been once, but no longer. That hatred, that malevolence, that scar… Zenko knew of only one Spirit that matched her description.

Kuchisake-onna. The Slit-Mouthed Woman. Whoever had been responsible for her downfall must have been cruel. Zenko hoped the Spirit rained her vengeance upon them without mercy. The woman had been wronged and deserved justice.

But she did not deserve Li. Li was innocent. Zenko had heard everything but the waterbender’s ice had prevented her from getting to Li, adding her power to his and helping him resist. All she could do was remain still, encased in ice, and watch as the Kuchisake-onna preyed on Li’s vulnerable mind.

For one moment, one terrible moment, Zenko had felt Li waver. Then heat had exploded outwards, instantly vaporizing the ice and filling the plaza with steaming fog. Caught off guard, the Kuchisake-onna had screamed, but she hadn’t vanished. She must have had Fire in her veins when she’d been alive.

Zenko had shaken herself and looked around. The Avatar’s waterbender and Toph had dropped to their hands and knees, clutching each other and shivering. The Dai Li who arrived after the waterbender’s attack had reacted quickly, but not quickly enough. They looked. They saw. One
died. One suffered.

Li… Li hadn’t moved from where he’d fallen. He lay in Jin’s arms, too cold, too still, barely breathing. His eyes had been half hooded and dim, the Fire within struggling to burn despite the bone and spirit-chilling cold.

Jin was shaking from cold and fear. Her young eyes, the shade of moose-lion fur, were wide and darting around at the dense, warm fog. She had flinched when she heard the horrible crunch and rip of flesh as the two Dai Li fell to the Kuchisake-onna’s hateful blade. But she did not flee. She stayed where she was, on her knees, eyes wide and staring, with Li’s limp, frozen form held securely in her shaking arms.

Brave girl.

:Close your eyes, girl!: Zenko warned, drawing a shocked shriek from Jin. Wide brown eyes locked on Zenko and stared. :Close your eyes! If you look at her, you will fall to her.: Jin had gulped, held Li tighter and shut her eyes, squeezing them hard enough to wrinkle her eyelids. Soft sobs shook her already shivering body. And Li still hadn’t moved. He lived, Zenko felt his inner Fire. But he wouldn’t live for much longer unless he warmed up. Cold was a firebender’s anathema.

The red glow of Li’s spirit sputtered weakly and Zenko hurried to his side. She shook the flakes of ice still clinging to her fur and pressed herself against Li’s vulnerable neck just like she’d done during his nightly astral treks. The Kuchisake-onna would not have him. She would not have either Li nor Jin.

:Stand aside, Knowledge Seeker. I have a claim on him. We are a matched set:

Zenko swished her tails in mounting annoyance and turned to face the Kuchisake-onna. Endless blue met bright, inhuman green that glowed like the naturally occurring crystals lighting Ba Sing Se. How appropriate.

:Wan Shi Tong has already laid claim on this one, Kuchisake-onna,: Zenko said, draping her tails over Li’s pale, bare throat. :Your claim is tenuous by comparison.: :Perhaps,: she admitted, her gentle voice soft like a whisper. :Unless he comes freely.: :He will not.: The malicious Spirit hummed and examined her long knife with a calm, practiced eye. Her porcelain skin glistening in the firebent fog she manifested in. :Twice he has wavered,: she said, running a finger along the blood soaked blade. Her ruby lips, like crimson rose petals, parted in a sigh. :This time he almost gave in. I wonder if the third time is the charm?:

“Wh- wha- what is th-that thing?” the waterbender’s shaky voice whispered, ocean blue staring at the murderous Spirit’s back.

:Shut your eyes, bender!: Zenko snapped furiously just as the Kuchisake-onna turned to her observer. Terrified, the mortal wisely shut her eyes and clung to the blind mortal. :I would offer you mercy,: Zenko said, aware of the precarious situation, :but she will not be so kind.: :You would take my prey from me, kitsune?: the beautiful, terrible Spirit murmured, genuine hurt in her soothing voice.
She cannot be your prey, Zenko said, lowering her head, baring her teeth, and flattening her ears in warning. She travels with the Bridge.

Rose red lips parted in surprise revealing a mouth much wider and horrifying than the sanguine lipstick would have her victims believe. The Avatar? she gasped. Here?

You didn’t know? Zenko’s growl became a dangerous grin. Your reach may be great, Kuchisake-onna, but your senses are dulled.

Crystalline green glistened with controlled fury, flickered to Li’s still half frozen and vulnerable form, then back to the fox Spirit. Are your senses dulled as well, fox? she asked. Four tails. Impressive. But are they enough to face me?

With her Human kit to protect? Doubtful. But Zenko would be damned if she didn’t try. I wonder, she replied, pawing the grown and allowing a deep throated growl to reverberate in the heavy, silent warmth of the firebent fog. Are you challenging me, Kuchisake-onna?

The Spirit in the form of a beautiful woman smiled and perhaps it would have had men and women falling at her feet when she was alive. But now, it would make mortal nerves fray and blood run cold. You are alone, little fox, she said. The head of your house is powerful, but he has no interest in this city. My city. My hunting ground. Predators do not share. Surely you understand.

Zenko understood. But she would not move. That same warmth she’d felt blossom in her chest when Jet decided to accept Li was a firebender, to continue to pursue his affections, to continue to try although his very beliefs had been challenged, returned. This… This was what Humans called a ‘heart.’ When Zenko finally understood the concept, she’d gained her fourth tail. Now, she would put that tail to the test.

Four tails.
Zenko.

Frigid fingers brushed one of her tails and Zenko wagged the nearest tail, lifting it and placing it gently over Li’s too-cold hand. She felt the smooth texture of chi-imbued paper and heard the faintest whisper of breathless words. A prayer to Agni. Nearly frozen and suffocated and Li was still fighting, burning. Truly, he was Fire.

The Kuchisake-onna advanced, holding her knife close to her breast. The mortal girl Jin whimpered softly in the eerie silence, clutching Li close for both safety and warmth.

I promised.

What? Li?

Zenko brushed the mortal kit’s mind, feeling the feebly flickering flame burning in her Spirit vision. It was still there, glowing, burning, fighting, living. Then her ears twitched, hearing mortal feet approach swiftly from all directions with expert skill.

“Woman in White!”

But I can’t protect you.

Stone gloves broke through the thick fog. The Kuchisake-onna’s gossamer form dispersed into diamond motes in the fog causing the earthbent gloves to slam ineffectively against the well and each other.
Return to Wan Shi Tong.

:Li?! No:-

Flames ignited between her tails, devouring a charm, carrying a broken prayer to the Great Spirit Agni in its smoke. But there was nothing left to burn. There was only a shivering waterbender, a blind and numb earthbender, a weeping child, and an unconscious firebender.

“I see.”

Zenko crouched, her sooty tails wrapped tightly around her paws and her nose sniffing the fur for any sign of singed ends. Her siblings stood protectively around her, nudging her and soothing her frayed nerves and glowing softly in her Spirit sight. Above her, Wan Shi Tong loomed, his immortal gaze studying Zenko’s shuddering form as he withdrew his wing from her forehead.

“A Kuchisake-onna,” the Knowledge Spirit murmured. “They are not common Spirits, though their power is worthy of note. It takes a great amount of malevolence to twist a soul into one. To twist a Spirit until their very nature becomes something else entirely…”

“Kuchisake-onna are traditionally a Fire Nation Spirit.”

Zenko turned her bright blue eyes to the Human-turned-Spirit standing nearby, pinching his chin and frowning in thought. The Spirit in the guise of an owl turned its head backwards to observe the professor as well.

“I’ve read about them on my travels,” Zei said. “The oldest version I could find of the Kuchisake-onna tale dates back to centuries before the Fire Nation started the Great War. She was supposedly the wife of a powerful lord, possibly even the Fire Lord himself. As I understand it, she had an affair with another great lord and her husband found out.” The professor’s gentle eyes were hard with sadness for someone out of reach. “Furious, her husband sliced her face through her mouth from ear to ear and said, ‘Who will think you are beautiful now?’”

The professor shook his head grimly. “The wound may have killed her, or maybe she killed herself, or maybe she didn’t die at all. But all stories end the same way.” He lifted his gaze to Zenko. “She conceals the lower half of her face, usually with a fan or scarf and approaches her victims asking only ‘Do you think I’m pretty?’ If they say no, she kills them right there. If they say yes, she reveals her wound and repeats the question. If her victim says no, she allows them to leave, then follows them to their home and murders them there. If they say yes, she slices their faces so their new scar matches hers.”

Zenko’s ears flipped up and she lifted her heard in shocked interest. :She said she and Li were a matched set.: She turned her pleading gaze to the head of her house. :What could she mean by that?:

Wan Shi Tong hummed but it was the professor who spoke. “His scar.” Zei dropped his gaze sadly. “I saw it. It was hard to miss,” he said with a weak laugh. “It was old but still so prominent. It marks him, it probably haunts him, and I have no doubt he is always aware of it. Perhaps it is the same with the injury unique to the Kuchisake-onna. It’s possible she sees a kindred spirit in him.”

“Perhaps,” Wan Shi Tong pondered. “I have heard of Spirits who have changed due to malevolence and Human interference.”
The Knowledge Spirit nodded slowly. “Hei Bai was wounded by Humans destroying its home, the source of its existence. By reminding Hei Bai a forest is nature and nature will grow back, the young Avatar was able to reverse the damage done. However, this Kuchisake-onna is different.”

Eyes the shade of the Void before time flashed. “Although it is likely the malevolence created by other Humans had an influence on her, I believe her change is largely due to her own hatred.” He turned to Professor Zei thoughtfully. “Women in White and Kuchisake-onna were once Human so they maintain a link to their Human sides. The emotions, the thoughts, the tendencies. Things those who began as Spirits do not fully comprehend.”

Zei nodded. “That would make sense,” he agreed. “But I have to say, I’ve only heard of a few Kuchisake-onna tales where her victims lived. They were victims who saw her for what she truly was and refused to answer her question directly, using answers like ‘so-so’ or ‘average’ or they threw things at her and ran away before she had the chance to ask.”

“So the question is the key,” Zenko said. She got to her feet and shook herself. “When Li and I were imprisoned in the waterbender’s ice, the Kuchisake-onna spoke to Li. She never asked him directly if he thought she was pretty. But this was not the first time she has interacted with him. Her gaze met Wan Shi Tong’s. It is possible she asked him previously.”

“If he’s still alive, then it’s likely he avoided answering her question directly,” Professor Zei said, crossing his arms over his chest. “She could be trying again.”

Zenko hesitated before shaking her head. “No. She did not try to wound him. She only spoke to him like a Woman in White would to her prey, luring him to a death by drowning. It was very unlike a Kuchisake-onna.”

Wan Shi Tong clacked his beak in displeasure. “It would seem she has not yet completed her transition from Woman in White to Kuchisake-onna.”

“Or maybe she never will,” Zei said suddenly, drawing the gazes of all the Spirits. Straightening his shoulders like a professor in front of a class, Zei spoke. “You said yourself she is a Spirit who was once Human. The wound to her face may have been done by a lover, which holds true to the Kuchisake-onna legend,” he said, holding up a finger to emphasize his point.

“However,” he continued, “she became a Woman in White first. Women in White are born from women whose lovers were disloyal. Then, in a fit of temporary insanity, they kill their children before taking their own lives. Knowing that,” Zei squeezed his arms and his eyes gleamed with grim sadness, “what if our Spirit lady was not the unfaithful spouse?”

“You mean it was her lover who was disloyal?” Zenko snarled, a growl working its way out of her throat.

“It would make sense,” Zei said sadly. “She discovers her lover cheating on her, her lover strikes her, probably to humiliate her—”

“Humiliate?” Zenko asked warily, her tails swishing in displeasure. “How would a wound like that humiliate?”

The professor nodded. “In the Earth Kingdom, young women of high stations rarely get the chance to choose their spouses. They are betrothed, often when they are very young. However, the future
husband’s family holds the power to accept or deny the arrangement. It is considered a sign of humiliation to the woman’s family if her face is ever injured.” He shrugged. “If she is married, it implies her spouse or protectors could not fulfill their duties. If she isn’t married, it’s implied she didn’t care enough about herself to stay out of harm’s way.”

Zenko snorted and Wan Shi Tong ruffled his feathers. “Truly,” the Knowledge Spirit said, “Humans will forever confound me.”

The professor hung his head. “And people wonder why I preferred to bury my head in books and history,” he mumbled. “Learning where we came from, where we are now, where we could go... It was much easier to deal with the dead and gone than the here and now.”

“Your insight into Human nature is useful here,” Wan Shi Tong said. “You must write your observations down for future reference.”

The professor instantly brightened. “Oh! I most certainly will. It would be an honor,” he said, bowing deeply to the Knowledge Spirit. “But as I was saying,” he said, straightening, “it is likely her unfaithful lover dealt her distinctive wound. Humiliated, she kills her own children then herself. That would fulfill the requirements to become a Woman in White.”

The Spirit in the form of an owl nodded slowly. “It would,” he said.

"Two children were murdered in a potter’s kiln. They were... very young.ː Zenko said. Then she made a warbling sound of confusion.ːBut the murderer was an earthbender and the Kuchisake-onna had been seen as a Woman in White before their deaths.ː"

“Indeed?” Wan Shi Tong murmured, narrowing his ancient eyes and leaning down so he face was close to Zenko’s. “Coincidence, do you think?”

"Perhaps," the professor mumbled. "But how could a Human soul become a Woman in White if her children weren't dead to begin with?" Zei gestured helplessly, then stiffened as a thought occurred to him. "Unless," he said slowly, allowing his thought to take shape in his mind, "her children never died in so many words."

:"How do you mean?: Zenko asked, sitting and tilting her head curiously. :::How can one die and yet not die?:"

"Well, and this is just conjecture," Zei said quickly, holding up a hand, "but it's possible she could have had her children taken away from her."

:"That could be seen as a form of... death?: Zenko asked studiously interested.

"It very well could," Zei admitted, nodding grimly. "Injured, humiliated, alone, her children lost to her in some way she viewed as death... I can see how suicide could be seen as a viable option."

:"Then her children are actually murdered,: Zenko murmured, lowering her head and folding her ears back. ::Assuming the children who died in the kiln were indeed the Kuchisake-onna's...: Her gaze lifted to the head of her house.

“Ah,” the Knowledge Spirit breathed, returning to his full height. “Harm done to one’s own house.” He clicked his beak and bobbed his head in a semblance of a nod. “That is something both Humans and Spirits understand. If they were part of her house, then her Spirit would have known of their deaths the moment it occurred.” He turned his head to the professor. “You agree.”

Zei pressed his lips together in a grim line and bowed his head. “As Zenko said, if they were
indeed the Kuchisake-onna's children, then yes.” He met Wan Shi Tong’s gaze levelly. “As both a Human and a Woman in White, she was a mother. The most terrible enemy to make is a mother who believes her children are in danger. They are more terrible than a Spirit’s wrath.”

Zenko’s head lifted in genuine surprise. :Truly?:

“I have heard such before,” the Knowledge Spirit said, tilting his head in a birdlike manner. “I was not inclined to believe such things.”

“You should,” Zei said seriously, meeting Wan Shi Tong’s eyes. “If that is what happened in this case, then a mother’s fury alone is quite possibly enough malice to change a relatively benign enemy like a Woman in White into the deadly hunter Kuchisake-onna. When combined with the alleged actions of her lover...” The professor lifted his eyebrows and inclined his head in what was almost a shrug.

:I must return to Ba Sing Se,: Zenko said urgently, meeting Wan Shi Tong’s gaze with her own as she swished her four tails.

“It was Li who banished you here,” Wan Shi Tong said curiously. “Why would you wish to return?”

:He banished me to protect me,: Zenko said, pawing the ground. :He knew I was no match for the Kuchisake-onna alone with only four tails. He kept his word.: She tilted her head. :You know this.:”

“I do.” The head of her house studied her silently before blinking and gesturing with his wing. “Find him and see to it the Kuchisake-onna knows I am not her enemy,” his gaze sharpened like obsidian shards, “unless she does to me what her lover did to her. Then I will take her challenge personally.”

Zenko nodded, leaped onto the bridge railing, and raced up the wall of the library, up the spire, and crossed into the mortal world. The run to Ba Sing Se would take time, but if she hurried, she should make it before moonset tonight.
In which Jet gets up the courage to ask some pressing questions, Aang learns something that could be good but is also, erm, mortifying?, and Jet wants a date with a sandwich that is very, very edible.

A/N: Very long chapter tonight because Jet and Aang surprisingly wouldn't stop talking. Not surprising at all really. Why do I even bother?

Side note: I've decided to use 'batchfire' as a curse word. Just cause.

“Mommy!” a boy cried, pointing at something in the animal pen on Jet’s right. “Miss Snowflake got out of the house again.”

...Miss Snowflake? Really??

“Fluffykins?!” a woman cried, staring at a particularly frightened cat that was… down in the wild animal pen? “What are you doing down there?”

...Fluffykins… Jet stopped chewing the straw he plucked from Longshot’s hat and just looked at the woman. She was dressed all in pink and had a healthy tan of a Middle Ring citizen. ...Why was Jet not surprised someone like her would name their pet something like, he shuddered, Fluffykins? The poor cat.

“On second thought,” Jet heard the zookeeper’s familiar voice say, a hint of amusement in the skinny man’s voice, “maybe you should stick to saving Humans.”

Jet turned his head at the sound of childish laughter and yep, there was the Avatar. Bald head, blue arrows, orange and yellow clothes, staff, the whole shebang. He felt Smellerbee nudge him encouragingly and he forced himself to relax. He hadn’t even realized how tense just seeing the Avatar had made him. Damn. This wasn’t going to be easy.

Last chance to back out.

Li was the Blue Spirit.

No chance in hell.

Taking a deep breath, Jet held it for three seconds, just like Li would do, then let it all out in a sigh. He didn’t feel great, but he felt better. Doing his best to keep his gait slow and easy, Jet strolled up to the raised stone rim of the animal pen the Avatar and Zookeeper Kenji stood by. Resting his forearms on the cool earth, he forced his shoulders to relax.
“He might be right, you know,” he drawled.

He didn’t look at Aang, but there was no way he could miss the way the Avatar jumped at his voice. The kid practically flew three feet up into the air before whirling around and raising his staff so the end pointed at him. Had this been anywhere else and Aang been anyone else, Jet might have taken offense. But this was Aang, they were out in the open, and they were surrounded by families and children. Nothing would happen.

Hopefully.

“Relax,” he said, waving a hand without shifting his deceptively relaxed position. “I’m not here to fight. I’m just here to talk.”

For a minute, Aang said nothing, but the tip of his staff lowered. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?” he asked eventually.

Good question, all things considered. Jet twirled the straw in his mouth as he thought. Finally, he shrugged.

“I don’t really have an answer for that,” he admitted. “I guess you’ll just have to believe me.” He glanced at the Avatar warily. “Would it help if I told you I had no idea you were even in Ba Sing Se until last night?” he asked.

Aang blinked in surprise. “I don’t know,” Aang said slowly, lowering his staff completely. “Why are you here? I thought you were still back in the forest with your-”

“They kicked me out,” Jet said, stomping over the Avatar’s words because the memory of being forced out of his home hurt. It still hurt. It would probably always hurt. “I came here for a fresh start. And, as it happens,” he stood and flashed a friendly grin Aang’s way, “Smellerbee and Longshot work at the zoo. So this is indirectly my business.”


He spun around and his jaw dropped open when he saw ‘Bee and Longshot talking to the zookeeper. Well, actually ‘Bee was talking and Longshot was listening. Zookeeper Kenji seemed excited about whatever he was talking about because his eyes sparkled and he gestured widely as he spoke. Smellerbee laughed and Jet felt his smile soften.

“It’s true,” Aang whispered.

Jet looked back at the twelve-year-old who was staring up at him with soft gray eyes that were weighing what they saw.

“You’ve changed,” Aang said.

“People change,” Jet said quietly. “Sometimes.” This was getting too mushy. “Look, other than the fact one of those crazy pygmy-pumas,” he said, glaring at the mid-sized felines in their new pen, “used my stomach as a launch pad on the way here-”

Aang laughed awkwardly. “Sorry ‘bout that,” he said, tapping his cheek. Geez, the kid still had some baby fat on him. “I didn’t think about how I would get them here when I let them out.”

“You should have,” Jet said, making sure his voice wasn’t as cutting as it could have been. “You may not realize it, but most of these animals can’t or won’t be domesticated. They’re still considered wild animals and I bet more than a few people were injured or lost things during that
“stampede back there.”

“It was an accident,” Aang said, scratching the back of his bald head and blushing.

Jet tsked. “I’m not surprised,” he said. “But you should have thought of that before you set the animals loose. The same goes for this place.” He looked around at the new zoo. He plucked his straw out of his mouth and tapped the branching end against his knuckles. “Most of these animals were born in captivity. They can’t survive in the wild, but they needed more room. This is great and exactly what these animals need.” He looked Aang straight in the eye. “Except for the fact you ripped up farms to make it.”

The boy stood straighter in surprise. “Huh? What do you mean?” he asked. “It was just open land.”

“Open land that was used for farming,” Jet said, keeping a firm grip on his patience. Aang was twelve and a monk. He didn’t understand. “Ba Sing Se is a big city and, however much the powers that be don’t want us to talk about it,” he glanced around warily and said in a softer voice, “we are at war. This city is essentially under siege. Besieged cities have a hard time getting resources like food from the outside so Ba Sing Se grows its own food here in the Agrarian Ring. It has to produce enough food to feed everyone. Everyone, Aang,” he repeated, holding Aang’s widening gaze. “You just took land used to feed these people and turned it into a zoo,” he finished.

He mentally patted himself on the back. He somehow kept from raising his voice. It was surprisingly easy to replace Aang’s face with one of the younger members of his Freedom Fighters. Young, wanting to help but not understanding why things weren’t done the way they thought was best, and not realizing that every action, no matter how well-intended, had consequences. Sometimes, those consequences were good. Other times, they weren’t.

“Look,” Jet said, “I’m just telling you this so you’re aware of what you did. I’m not mad. Frustrated, oh Spirits yeah, but not mad. Now, there are quite a few people who will be mad at you. Like the farmers who owned the land you made this zoo out of.” Aang’s flush deepened and he looked scared and oh fuck. “Relax,” Jet said quickly. “I doubt they’ll be able to do much. You’re the Avatar, after all. But that’s just it. You are the Avatar. You need to remember that. Yeah?”

There was still guilt and fear in Aang’s wide rain cloud eyes, but there was also surprise and awe. “Wow,” the boy murmured. “You really have changed.”

And there went Jet’s self control. He huffed and turned away. He could feel his cheeks warming and it was just awkward and damn it blushing was Li’s thing not Jet’s what the actual fuck change the subject now.

“I’m sorry your friends kicked you out.”

...that’s not the subject change Jet was referring to.

“‘S fine.” It wasn’t. Not even close. “Got me here.” The only good thing to come out of that painful mess. He came here and met Li. Speaking of Li- “You ever heard of the Blue Spirit?” he asked without preamble.

Oh? Was that fear on Aang’s face? Interesting.

“Y-yeah,” the Avatar said, swinging his staff so he held it behind him and shifted from foot to foot. This kid… “I know of him.” Gray eyes sharpened to something almost like suspicion. Odd.

Yeah, Jet bet the kid knew him. “See,” Jet began, popping his straw back in his mouth and flicking it with his tongue absently as he leaned back against the stone pen rim, “a little cowbird told me
this Blue Spirit person saved you from a Fire Nation fortress. That true?”

And now the suspicion was darker than Jet expected. He turned to face Aang fully, frowning at the midget curiously. “What’s with that look?” Jet said, jutting his chin at Aang’s face. “Is it true or isn’t it?”


Jet blinked. “Huh?”


Jet huffed and groaned, rolling his eyes in exasperation. “Look,” he drawled, standing and shifting his weight so it settled on one hip comfortably, “I’m not looking for a fight.” Just to further his point, Jet waved his empty hands, palms toward Aang, before tucking them into his pockets. “I’m asking because,” how to explain this without sounding like a creeper, “you see,” he bit his lip,” I know this guy and I-” he scratched his messy hair awkwardly, “I don’t want anything to- I-” Ah, fuck. “I like him, okay?” Jet said and yes, he admitted to himself, he was definitely blushing. A little bit. “I just need to make sure I can protect him in case, you know,” he shrugged, “anything happens to him.”

Aang was quiet. Too quiet. Jet lifted his gaze to the Avatar and was unnerved to see genuine fear there. Okay, that was unexpected. Shock? Yeah. A bit of fear? Yeah. Distrust? Yeah. Outright fear? …no. What was Jet missing?

“You know-” Aang bit off whatever else he was going to say with a gulp. “How do you know him?” he breathed. “Where is he? He’s not here, is he? He’s not in Ba Sing Se?” The kid leapt up and stayed in the air at Jet’s eye level, uncomfortably close to Jet’s face. Aang’s gray eyes were wide and fearful and yet commanding. “Jet,” Aang said sternly, “you have to tell me. He’s not in Ba Sing Se, right? Tell me he’s not here.”

...yeah, Jet was definitely missing something. And like hell Jet was going to rat out his new boyfriend to a twelve year old, even if that twelve year old was the Avatar. Especially since that twelve year old was the Avatar. Twelve year olds threw temper tantrums. Twelve year old Avatars? Jet shuddered at the thought of that kind of temper tantrum.

“Why?” Jet said instead, meeting Aang’s gaze without flinching. “Why do you want to know? What aren’t you telling me?”

Aang flew back and landed back on solid ground where Human feet belonged thank you very much and flushed awkwardly. But, despite the blush, the Avatar’s eyes remained fearful and stern in his red cheeks.


“I’m sure,” Jet said in clipped tones. “So simplify it.”

The Avatar looked up at him and Jet pursed his lips in mounting annoyance.

“You need to stay away from him, Jet,” Aang said. “Just trust me. He’s not who you think he is.”

“You mean he’s a-” Jet bit off his words and pointedly looked around to make sure no one was within earshot before trying again. “You mean he’s a firebender,” he whispered softly. Aang’s eyes
bugged in shock and Jet sighed. Of course that would be it. “Yeah, I already know. He told me. Shoved me, actually. But yeah, I’m aware. That doesn’t change anything. But if you tell anyone,” Jet added, glaring at Aang with all the heat he could muster, “I won’t care if you’re the Avatar. I will make you wish you died with the rest of the Air Nomads.”

Okay. Maybe that was going a bit too far. Aang’s rain cloud eyes were wide and watery and hurt and shit. This was a kid, Jet. A Spirits-damned kid. A kid who lost his whole society. Ease up a little. Jet took another deep breath, counted to three, then let it out.

“Sorry,” he said, letting his shoulders slump. “I didn’t mean-” He groaned. “Look, I like him, Aang. Do you understand?” Please understand. “Just because he’s- different… that doesn’t change anything. He trusted me enough to tell me that. I’m not going to screw him over. I like him.”

The Avatar seemed to calm down, but Jet could still see the hurt in the kid’s eyes shining crystal clear. He really had gone too far.

“Hey,” Jet said softly. “Aang. I am sorry. I really shouldn’t have said that.” He hung his head because yeah, he really had been a dick. “I know what’s it’s like to lose everything you knew and loved. Heh. Twice. Damn. Shit, man, I sorry.”

“I- it’s okay,” Aang said, softly.

“No, it’s not,” Jet said, rubbing his neck shamefully. He’d bullied a twelve year old. He felt like a batchfire.


Straightening, Jet forced his thoughts back to the whole reason why he was here. “I just want a few answers,” he said. “You don’t have to give me any details, just… Yes or no, is fine.”

He looked up and the Avatar was studying him thoughtfully. For a moment there, Aang almost looked like an adult.

“I guess,” Aang said. “But, why do you need to know about- the B-Blue Spirit?”

“Because I can’t ask him directly,” Jet admitted with a shrug. “Not I won’t,” he corrected, holding up a finger to stop any potential questions, “I literally can’t. I can’t tell you why without breaking his confidence, but I really can’t ask him. He can’t give me an answer. He literally can’t. So I can’t ask him.”

Aang’s dark eyebrows climbed up his bald forehead and he cocked his head and stared at Jet in confusion. “Oh-kay,” he said slowly, drawing out the word. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Thanks,” Jet said, not bothering to hide his relief. “So, by now, I think we can safely assume that you do know the Blue Spirit?”

“Okay, and based on your reaction earlier, you probably know his true name, too. That right?” Again, Aang nodded. This time, there was an odd expression on the boy’s face. It was… almost sad. “You don’t have to tell me what it is,” Jet said and Aang blinked in surprise. “I just want to know two main things.” He held up two fingers. “One,” he bent one finger, “is it true that the Blue Spirit saved your life when you were captured by the Fire Nation and held in a fortress?”

Aang grimaced and nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Katara and Sokka got sick and I found a healer who said they needed to suck on frozen frogs-” what the fuck “-so I went out to find them and got
caught and Z- the Blue Spirit got me out.” She shifted from foot to foot. “One of those crazy good archers-”

“Yu Yan,” Jet said, frowning. He knew of them. Anyone who fought against the Fire Nation often enough had at least heard of the Yu Yan. They were stupid accurate. It was scary.

Aang nodded. “Yeah, them,” he said. “Well, one of them shot the Blue Spirit, knocking him out. I… almost left him there when I recognized him.” Do not hit the kid. Jet had been just as bad in the past. “When he woke up,” Aang dropped his sad wolf-fox pup eyes, “I asked if we could have been friends, you know, if things had been different.” If Li hadn’t been a firebender. “He attacked me, then let me go.”

There was definitely more to that story than Jet could fully understand. He recognized subtext and the knowledge that there was a history between people when he saw it. He may not know what that subtext or history was, but he knew it was there. Some things were better left alone. It wasn’t as if Li could defend himself anyway.

“Okay,” Jet said, nodded. “Last question.” He waited until Aang looked up at him again before speaking. “You met an old firebender in a ghost town a while back. Don’t answer that,” Jet said quickly, holding a silencing hand, “I already know you did. I spoke to the guy. He’s an old man, brews tea, utterly harmless. He said the Fire Princess was there. That she attacked you.”

It wasn’t a question, but Aang nodded. “Y-yeah. She’d been tracking us using Appa’s fur,” Aang said, his demeanor serious and sad. “He was shedding and- yeah. They followed that.”


“You left a trail of fur,” Jet said in a flat tone.

“Yeah.”

“You knew you were leaving a trail of fur.”

“Well, not at first, but kind of, later.”

Jet stared. “Did you know it was shedding season for Appa?”

Aang shrugged. “I mean, yeah,” he said. “It happens every year. Flying bison have to shed their winter coats sometime before summer. Otherwise they get too hot.”

“You knew Appa was shedding.” Jet said slowly, “and it still took you a while to figure out someone was tracking you using Appa’s fur.”

“We figured it out!” Aang said defensively. “I made a fake trail of fur-”

“Which I’m sure was stupidly obvious.”

Aang glared at him without any real heat. “-and had Sokka and Katara and Toph take Appa in the opposite direction,” he finished.

Wait. “Did the Fire Princess find you while you were going back to meet Katara and the others?” Jet asked. Aang said nothing. “You were planning on going back to them. Right?”

That face… Fuck. Jet rubbed his face because twelve year old thinking was… ugh. “Okay, I won’t press,” he said with a sigh. “Just, when the Fire Princess found you, was there anyone else there?”
Aang blinked. “Oh, well, me,” he said.

No duh. “I meant did anyone else show up other than you and the Fire Princess?” Jet asked. Patience, Jet. Fuck everything, just be patient. “In the ghost town, did you find the Fire Princess or did she find you? Were you there first or was she there first?”

“I was there first,” Aang said promptly. “I was going to wait for her so I could talk to her.”


“Okay,” Jet said, trying not to sound condescending. “You were going to… talk to the Fire Princess.” As if that was possible. “She shows up. Did anyone else show up?”

“Not at first,” Aang said. “Z- er, um, well, someone else showed up and Azula seemed more interested in fighting him than me.”

“Let me guess,” Jet said. “This Z-person is the Blue Spirit.”

Aang flushed and nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Sorry. I don’t usually call him the Blue Spirit. I call him by his name.”

Which Jet really wanted to know. But would it be a good idea for him to find out? He’d have to keep it a secret from Li. ...or did he? He could always ask Li if he wanted to know. But then, Li had said he was afraid of the person he’d been. Li never said anything like that unless he meant it. Li was scared of his past. Li’s former name was a part of his past. Would his name trigger his lost memories? More importantly, if it did, would Li appreciate it?

Jet sighed. “Don’t tell me his name,” he said finally. “Long story,” he said to forestall the no doubt endless flood of questions. “It’s not really my story to tell. If you want to know, you can ask him later.”

Aang hesitated, then nodded. “Okay.”

Right. The question. “I know Toph and your friends showed up sometime during your fight,” he said. “Toph told me.”

“You know Toph?” Aang gasped, hovering above the ground in excitement. He drifted back down in confused hurt. “She didn’t tell me.”

Jet waved aside Aang’s concern. “We only met the other day,” he said. “I asked her not to tell ‘cause, you know, I don’t really want to get frozen to a tree again.” He glanced back at the city in beyond the Inner Wall. “Or a building.”

“Oh. Right. Yeah.” Aang flushed and laughed nervously. “I forgot about that.”

“I haven’t,” Jet said. “I’d rather not see Katara again. I’ve moved on.” To Li. Blushy, awkward, honest, clever, sexy Li. Ugh, Spirits. Patience was necessary but it was killing him. Not right now. Back on topic. “So Toph and your gang show up, help you and the old firebender guy fight off the Fire Princess,” he said, catching and holding Aang’s gaze. “What happened to the Blue Spirit?”

Aang blinked. “I don’t know,” he said, swinging his staff absently and rubbing his chin as he thought. “I didn’t really notice. I was trying too hard not to die. Azula’s crazy, Jet,” he said, his gaze hard and tinged with fear. “She shoots blue fire.”

What. The. Fuck?! Blue fire?!” That was a thing?! ...well shit.
“She was fighting Z— the Blue Spirit and me at the same time,” Aang continued.

“So he was helping you?” Jet interrupted.

“Uh, well, kind of?” Aang said. “I mean, he was fighting me too, just not as hard.” Li was fighting Aang? Yeah, there was definitely a story there. “He was fighting Azula harder. I don’t really know what happened. I didn’t see him when we cornered Azula.” He blinked in realization. “Actually, I didn’t see him at all after that. I guess he left.”

“He didn’t,” Jet said grimly.

Jet should. He definitely should. He was reining in his fury because Aang left Li behind injured and alone in the ghost town and he hadn’t even known. Jet knew warfare. He’d fought his fair share of skirmishes. He knew how it was too easy to lose track of things in the heat of battle. That’s why he went out of his way to make sure that didn’t happen. But even then, some things slipped through the cracks. No one was perfect.

Aang wasn’t perfect. He was the Avatar, but he wasn’t perfect. He was a kid and a pacifist. He fought when he had no other choice and tended to stick to defensive maneuvers. Against an opponent like Fire Princess Azula, Jet doubted Aang had much of a chance. Even with the Blue Spirit backing him. Li’s firebending, what Jet had seen of it anyway, wasn’t very showy and explosive. Nothing like the typical Fire Nation army foot soldier firebending.

Li may be a master of the dao blades, but Jet knew that sometimes more was needed. There had been more than one occasion where Jet and his hook swords hadn’t been enough and Longshot’s accurate archery or Smellerbee’s wicked knife work had had to get him out of a very tight spot. Just the thought of Li, out there fighting against Fire Princess Azula with his not-flashy firebending and dao blades next to a pacifistic airbender who may be the Avatar but was still just a twelve year old in just about every way that mattered….

Yeah. That was a nightmare.

At least Aang looked suitably surprised. “He didn’t?” the boy gasped. Then his gaze sharpened with suspicion. “Wait. How do you know?”

“I put it together with what he can remember and what the old firebender told me,” Jet said.

Aang’s frown deepened. “Remember?”

Shit. “He was hurt,” Jet said, trampling on his slip hoping Aang would forget it. “Bad. He woke up and stumbled away with no help. He made it here and just wants to be left alone.” Jet groaned. “You know, I promised myself I wouldn’t be mad at you if you knew he was there and left him behind.” He sighed and let his head loll back so he stared up at the blue sky. “But I know how you missed it. I don’t like it. But I get it.”

He did. He really did. He was still furious on Li’s behalf, but he really did get it. Didn’t stop him from wanting to smack some sense into Aang, but that was the big brother in him. He heaved a sigh.

“I have what I wanted,” he said, turning on his heel. “See you around, Aang.”


Jet paused by ‘Bee and Longshot and looked over his shoulder at the tattooed midget.
“Can, um…” The boy bit his lip. “Did your friend, the B-Blue Spirit-”

“Li.”

“-did- huh?” Aang blinked up at Jet in confusion. “Li?”

Jet nodded. “He goes by Li.”

“Er, okay then. Did Li ever, well.” Man, Aang could give Li a run for his money in the awkward department. “Did he ever ask about me?” Aang said.

Jet bit his straw and shook his head. “I doubt he could have if he wanted to, kid,” he admitted.

Aang grimaced. “That doesn’t make sense,” he grumbled. “He’s always chasing me. Why stop now?”

Well, Jet could think of a few reasons.

“And why are you friends with him?” Aang asked urgently. Jet just looked at him and the kid frantically waved his hands and hurried to defend himself. “I mean, not that I don’t want you to start making friends with firebenders or anything,” Jet’s gaze narrowed, “but why? Since when did you start…?” He waved his hand helplessly and ‘Bee snickered. Traitor.

“Since I decided I wanted to fuck him,” Jet answered honestly. Oh-ho. Who knew Aang could blush almost as darkly as Li. Jet snorted. “See you later, squirt,” he said, turning around and tossing a careless wave over his shoulder.

Aang called after him, but Jet ignored it. It probably wasn’t that important. Besides, there was something pressing that he intended to take care of involving a date with a breathless Li and a particularly supportive wall. Hmm. How fast could he get to the tea shop from here?
Bad News

Chapter Summary

In which Jet is slowly but surely getting an unpleasant feeling in his gut.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Meant to update last night, but my computer decided it was going to shut down, update, and restart instead. ...yay updates... I remember back when computers and phones were built to last for years not weeks. >( Anywho, there is some minor gore in this chapter. Just fair warning.

Whatever Jet had been expecting when he got to the tea house, it had not been a shut door with a ‘Closed’ sign dangling on the handle. There were more than a few disgruntled customers lingering by the shut door before huffing and walking away. It was only the early afternoon now. Jet knew the Pao Family Tea House never closed until about an hour after nightfall. It should be open. Why wasn’t it?

What happened?

He knocked on the shut door. Nothing. He leaned over and peered through the wooden slats covering the windows. It was dark inside but there was movement and the sound of… crying? Weird.

“Hey Pao!” he called through the window. “You okay in there?”

“Go away!”

Well then. “Are you alright?” Jet called. “Is Li here?”

A wet snort. “If that brat ever comes back here, he’s fired,” Pao said, sounding like he was shouting through tears.

What the hell? Pao didn’t find out… Li didn’t slip up, did he? Had Pao seen Li bend by accident?

“Pao,” Jet called, unable to keep all of the urgency from his voice. “You need to tell me what happened. What’s going on? What did Li do? And where’s Mushi?”

At first there was no response. Then Jet heard the subtle thumps of feet walking across the stone floor followed by the front door creaking open. He leaned back from the window and got a good look at the tea house owner’s face.

The man had clearly been crying. His face was red and splotchy and streaked with old and new tears. His mustache was messy and his uniform was dirty. His eyes were bloodshot and he looked about ready to fall apart into a crying mess.
“What the hell happened to you?” Jet gasped, staring unashamedly.

Pao sniffled. “We ran out of water,” he whined.

...what…? He must have heard that wrong.

Jet shook his head to clear it. “Y-you ran out of what?” he asked in disbelief.

Pao grimaced and ducked back inside almost pulling the door fully closed after him. “We ran out of water,” he mumbled. “I sent Li out to get more with that regular morning customer Jin, but neither of them came back.” He sniffled again. “With Mushi gone, I couldn’t handle it. I had to kick everyone out when we ran out of water.”

That made no sense and raised several questions. Like, “Why is Mushi gone?” Jet asked. “He was here this morning. I saw him.” Hell, Jet had spoken to the old man.

Pao had the grace to look slightly ashamed. “I let him take the day off after he helped me open,” he said softly. “It’s the anniversary of his son’s death.”

Oh. That, Jet could understand. Respect to ancestors and lost relatives was something he could and did respect. Granted, the shrine to his family was small and old, but it was all he had left of everything he once loved. He would never forget the day they died. He bowed his head and nodded.

“Okay. Where’s Li, though?” he couldn’t help but ask. “You said he went to get more water. Why wouldn’t he come back?”

Pao shook his head, a spark of fury returning to his reddened eyes. “That girl Jin went with him. Maybe they decided to-”

“I know what you’re about to say,” Jet interrupted, “and don’t bother. Li’s picky about people touching him and I happen to know he’s not interested in Jin that way.”

“Oh? And how would you know?” the tea house owner demanded.

Jet just lifted one eyebrow. “He’s my boyfriend,” he said in a flat tone. Did this guy really miss that? Jet hadn’t been subtle at all. He hadn’t even tried to be subtle.

Pao blinked, his mouth slowly dropping in surprise. “Oh,” he said in a small voice. “Well, then why would…” He shook his head and opened the door wider with a sigh. “Then I don’t know why Li didn’t come back.”

“Did Jin come back?” Jet pressed. When Pao shook his head, Jet began worrying his lip with his teeth. “Do you know which well they went to?” he asked. There were a few to choose from, all scattered in different directions. He needed to know which way to start looking.

“No,” Pao said, shaking his head. “But,” he added, leaning out the door and pointing down the street, “the nearest well is in the restaurant district. Several of the restaurants there were closed down because people have been getting sick after eating there. That’s why we were so busy today.”

Jet looked down the street where Pao pointed and frowned. “I’ll see if I can find him,” he said and ran off without waiting to hear more.

He wished Smellerbee and Longshot had left the zoo with him. But they had elected to stay behind...
and familiarize themselves with the new place. Of course, Zookeeper Kenji had all but demanded it so that was another good reason for them to stay. Still, Jet would have preferred to have his best friends here right now. They were a large part of his impulse control. Without them, Jet felt alone in this huge, sprawling city.

Except for when he was with Li. Where was Li? Li was anything if not punctual, even early, if he was going anywhere. He was quiet but completed every task given to him. The Li Jet knew would not just run off and stay away without a very good reason.

Like the Dai Li being everywhere. Woah. Jet slowed down his sprint and dodged into an alley to avoid being caught. Yeah. Knowing Li’s luck, he was probably somewhere up where all those Dai Li were. Which meant something had definitely happened to Li. Which meant Jet needed to get there now.

Leaning around the corner, Jet counted the distinctive green uniforms and hats. There were Guards blocking off the plaza to anyone who wasn’t already there and refusing to allow anyone in there to leave. Damn. That made things a bit tricky. Not impossible, but tricky. He leaned back into the alley and considered the odds.

It was sunny out but there were scattered clouds moving quickly with the high winds aloft. That made the light uncertain. And although every Dai Li was an earthbender, Toph had made it clear that she couldn’t feel wood and she used her earthbending to freaking see. He looked up, studying the wall of the building he leaned against. The walls were mostly stone, but there was wood lining the windows, wooden decorative beams, and a mostly wooden roof. He’d have to watch himself on the ceramic ties, though. But overall, it was doable.

He grit his teeth, dearly missing his hook swords. Should he risk running back to his shared apartment to get them? It would lose him valuable time, but it would make it easier to deal with any problems he might have to face. But could Li last that long?

Li was good, but Jet doubted the waiter had his dao blades with him. With a groan, Jet turned and began climbing up the wooden beams lining the building’s walls. His swords would have to wait. He was perfectly capable of handling himself without them. Mostly. He just had to be careful and keep his contact with stone to a bare minimum.

Hauling himself up to the roof, Jet peered over the ledge. Sure enough, there were two Dai Li perched on a roof overlooking the plaza on the next building down the road. Moving slowly to minimize noise, Jet pulled himself up fully onto the roof and scooted along the wooden ledge with his knees and shins. He kept his feet pointed so none of his toes brushed the tiles.

Once he got to the central beam, he crouched and considered the distance between the edge of the roof he stood on and the roof the Dai Li occupied. He could probably jump it, but he would land on the tiles and give himself away. Well, if that’s the way it was going to be-

He stood, balancing his weight carefully, and looked down at the plaza beyond and below the next roof. He couldn’t see the whole thing from this vantage point, but he could see enough. The area was crawling with Dai Li. Relatively speaking. Counting the two agents on the roof in front of him, there were four other Dai Li agents total which was four more than the usual. Actually, make that five Dai Li. And wouldn’t you know it, that one talking to a kneeling agent by the well looked familiar. What did he say his name was again?

Tengfei. What was Tengfei and that kneeling agent looking at? That red looked a lot like… like…

Oh Spirits. That was… Jet swallowed and forced himself to calm down, relax his muscles, and
process what he was seeing. Lying on the ground, half hidden by the well, was the bloodied remains of a Dai Li. The muscle and bone of his neck had been neatly sliced clean through leaving the head to loll at an unnatural angle, only connected to the body by a thin strip of skin. Jet had seen horrible sights similar to this during his time as the leader of the Freedom Fighters, but he’d done his utmost best to keep the younger members from seeing it. It was never pleasant.

Fuck secrecy. Crouching, Jet launched himself to the next roof, landing better than he planned considering the roof’s slant. The startled Dai Li agents, whirled and lashed out with chains from their sleeves what?! He dodged the first three weighted iron links, but felt the fourth loop around his right wrist. Fuck.

“Hey Tengfei!” Jet shouted, ignoring the shocked expressions of the other Dai Li and a handful of onlookers lingering on the ground below. “Call off your buddies. I just want to know what’s going on.”

Tengfei stared up at the rooftop, genuinely surprised to be addressed so directly. But at least he recovered fairly quickly. “Bring him down,” he called up to the rooftop agents. “He’s an informant.”

Informant? A promotion. Nice. Didn’t get him the pampered treatment though. The iron chain on his wrist was joined by a pair of earthbent gloves that gripped his shoulders and jerked him onto an earthbent platform. He waited as the Dai Li bent the stone back into the ground before stepping off and strolling right up to Tengfei.

He looked at both of the stone gloves on his arms then up at Tengfei. “Hello to you too,” he drawled.

The Dai Li rolled his eyes. “Did anyone ever tell you, you’re a brazen idiot?” he said, not removing the stone gloves.

Jet shrugged. “Yeah,” he said easily. “I take it as a compliment.”

Tengfei let out a long, slow sigh and Jet bounced both eyebrows to his hairline twice tauntingly. Sharp green eyes shot him a flat, unimpressed stare and said nothing. So Jet did instead.

“So,” he drawled lazily, deliberately looking away from Tengfei to the dead Dai Li whose body was being covered by a white sheet, “you gonna tell me what happened? Or, better yet, get these things off me?” he shrugged his shoulders indicating the earth gloves still there. “They’re really uncomfortable.”

For a few seconds, Tengfei said nothing. Then he huffed and waved a hand to disintegrate the earth gloves. “It was a Spirit attack,” he said, following Jet’s gaze to the body. “The Woman in White was here.”

Shit! Damn it, where was Li?! Where was- Wait. “But Women in White don’t kill like that,” Jet said incredulous. “They kill their victims the same way they committed suicide and no one can kill themselves like that.”

The Dai Li nodded, clasping his hands behind his back. “I know,” he said. Green eyes lifted back to Jet and his frown deepened. “Why are you really here?”

“I’m looking for Li,” Jet answered, watching Tengfei’s expression closely. He didn’t miss the subtle downward twitch at the corners of the man’s lips and the slightest narrowing of those green eyes. “You know where he is.” Jet said.
The Dai Li agent gave Jet an oddly piercing look before grimacing and glancing at something around a nearby corner. “This way,” he said, turning on his heel. “You’re friend has been asking for you.”

His ‘friend’? Li? Determined, Jet caught up to Tengfei and followed him around the corner to a small building with a sign hanging from it that read Autumn Leaf Clinic. Hey. This was Roulan’s clinic, wasn’t it? Why were they here?

When Agent Tengfei paused a yard or so from the door and sighed, Jet braced himself.

“Before we go in,” Tengfei said, “I need to know something.”

“Oh-kay,” Jet said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Not unnerving at all.”

“This is serious,” the Dai Li snapped, turning to face Jet directly. “I can’t help you if I don’t know the truth.”

Jet wrinkled his nose incredulous and flicked the straw in his mouth with his tongue. “Help me?” he said. “Why would you want to help me? And help me with what?” Wait. “Li?” Oh Spirits no.

“Is it Li?” Oh shit no. “What happened? Is he alright?”

“Is that his real name?” the Dai Li interrupted sharply, keeping his voice down. “Li. Is that his real name?”

Where was this coming from? And why? “It’s the name he gave me,” Jet said. It was the truth. “What’s it matter anyway?”

“It matters,” Tengfei said, his green eyes hard, “because there’s a waterbender in there who says otherwise. She was rather loud about it too. More than a few people heard and hardly anyone in the area missed it when she froze the boy solid.”

All the air rushed out of his lungs. Froze him?! “A waterbender-!” Jet turned to the clinic with wide, terrified eyes. “Is he in there?” he gasped, already moving towards it. “Is he alr-”

“Not yet!” the Dai Li said, grabbing Jet’s bicep and hauling him back away from the clinic. “Answer my question first.”

“Why does it matter?” Jet snarled, yanking his arm free and glaring viciously at the Dai Li. “He’s never done anything to deserve some crazy water bitch freezing him. And what about Jin? She was there with him.” Speaking of- “Where’s Zenko?” he demanded. “She’ll vouch for Li.”

Tengfei’s gaze sharpened suspiciously. “Zenko?”

“The fox,” Jet said. “Her name’s Zenko. Where is she? She’ll vouch for Li.”

For a minute, Tengfei said nothing, pursing his lips in thought. “She’s not here,” he said finally. “She was gone by the time we got to Li and the girl.”

“The water bitch or-”

“She said her name was Jin,” Tengfei said. “Ze- The Knowledge Seeker wasn’t there. Just Li and Jin and the Avatar’s waterbending and earthbending teachers.”

The Avatar’s… waterbending… No. Fuck. Fuck! It made so much sense. If Aang knew about Li, then she probably knew about him too. Aang had warned Jet to stay away from Li but he hadn’t
said why. Just that he should. If Aang felt that way about Li, if Aang knew Li’s real name and that he was a firebender, then it stood to reason she did too.

“Katara,” Jet growled.

The Dai Li blinked. “You know her?”

“Oh I more than know her,” Jet snarled, pushing past the green clad agent and stalking towards the clinic door. “I fucking dated her.”

Tengfei made a strangled sound in the back of his throat but Jet ignored it. Instead, he opened the clinic door with a bit more force than was really necessary and looked around. It took a couple seconds for his eyes to adjust to the lower lighting. When he could see clearly again, he scanned the small clinic’s waiting room.

It was full of buckets of water and a startled apprentice healer who’d been in the process of making a poultice of some kind. Not Katara. But Jet wasn’t surprised. Katara probably wasn’t a patient anyway. She was a waterbender. She was probably helping the healers. He stepped through into the clinic proper and looked around at the patients stretched out on mats across the floor. Sure enough, sitting in the corner, wrapped in a blanket and shivering by the stove but with her hands gloved in softly glowing water over a patient’s head was-

“Katara!” he shouted.

The Water Tribe girl’s head snapped up at his voice and immediately her demeanor darkened with hateful fury.

“Jet!” she hissed. “What are you doing here?”

Well, actually it was more of a stuttered snarl. She was shivering. How was she so cold? It was almost sweltering in here. Not that Jet cared. He was too furious to care. So was Katara apparently. The water that had been soothing the patient by her knees suddenly streamed out, ready to lash him like a whip.
“That’s enough!” Tengfei shouted.

Earth rumbled and Katara suddenly found her knees covered with a thin but strong blanket of stone preventing her from standing and adopting a fighting stance. Jet wasn’t much better. His feet sank up to his ankles in the stone floor and rock gloves distinctive of the Dai Li gripped his biceps, holding him in place and preventing him from wobbling.

“You make one more move, young lady, and you’ll be banned from this establishment,” Roulan snapped, glaring furiously at the waterbender threatening Jet. “And I’ll make sure to spread the word to the other healing clinics too until every establishment in our guild knows to kick you out if they see you.”

The girl’s bright blue eyes stared at Roulan in dumb shock, but the healer didn’t waste her breath. “And you Jet,” she said, washing her hands in the nearby bowl and toweling off her hands. “You want to fight? Fine. Take it outside. This is a healing clinic. You want to hurt each other? Be my guest. Outside.”

Jet spat and the only reason Roulan didn’t smack him a good one was because the boy had spectacular aim. Right at young Katara’s cheek. The girl looked absolutely mortified and disgusted. Frankly, Roulan had seen worse, gotten worse. This was nothing. But Katara acted like she’d been slapped.

“That is enough, Jet,” the Dai Li Tengfei commanded, tightening his grip on the boy’s arms with his rock gloves. “Control yourself or you will be removed.”

“Like hell,” Jet snarled, struggling in his earthen bindings. “She froze my fucking boyfriend! Fucking bitch!”

Roulan’s eyebrows flew to her hairline. Well. No wonder Jet was in such a state. She could hardly
blame him. “Katara,” she said sternly, fixing her gaze on the temporary patient and healer in her clinic. “Is that true?”

The girl looked like she’d swallowed a fish whole. “Yo- You’re boyfriend?!” she cried, completely ignoring Roulan. “Zu-”

“Katara!” the Dai Li said, cutting off the waterbender’s words. “Choose your next words carefully.”

Why would the Dai Li stop Katara from-

“I have chosen carefully,” Katara hissed angrily. “You people are obsessed with wiping every hint of the war-” Roulan flinched and Tengfei’s gaze sharpened dangerously in warning- “from these people’s minds until they’re all nothing but pig-sheep. Zuko is Fire Nation!”

Three things happened in the span or time it took Roulan to blink. First, everyone in the clinic who was still conscious and aware enough to hear and understand Katara’s words tensed, shocked by the waterbender’s words. Second, Tengfei formed a brand new rock glove and launched it right at Katara’s mouth, silencing her. And third, every bit of water in the clinic became solid ice.

Jet tugging his feet uselessly against the earth that entrenched them and raged, “Who fucking cares who his parents fucked! They’re both dead now. He lives with his aunt and uncle who just so happen to by Earth! And you want to drag Li’s name through the coals just because he’s got gold eyes?!” The hate visible on Jet’s face was intimidating even to someone as jaded as Roulan. “Funny that. I seem to recall back when we were dating -” what? “-a certain someone freezing me to a tree and lecturing me about how wrong it is to hurt someone just because I don’t like something about them. Maybe you should take some of your own medicine, Katara. I hope you choke on it.”

Roulan stared into the silence that hung thick and heavy in her clinic. One glance back at the front entrance showed an equally stunned silent Little Tang. GuoGuo and Master Xiu were leaning around the open back door to watch the fallout: GuoGuo with an awed expression and Master Xiu with a wry expression that bordered on amusement. He always was an odd one.

The Master Healer caught Roulan’s eye and sighed, vanishing briefly before walking through the door into the clinic. His blue and green uniform declared his mixed heritage as loudly as his words never would. His dark blue eyes rolled lazily over the tableau with an air of mild frustration. Roulan made a mental note to slip him a stiff drink later.

“If you’re both quite finished,” he drawled, reaching his arms up to the ceiling in a full body stretch that drew more than a few wine-worthy pops, “then I’m going to ask you to keep your voices down. If not, then feel free to settle your dispute outside where none of my patients will be further harmed and where the Dai Li can make sure nothing gets out of hand.”

He looked directly at Katara for several seconds before meeting the Dai Li’s distrustful gaze with a friendly smile. “Many of these patients are a bit dizzy and are having trouble understanding what’s being said. But all the loud noise is still not good for their ears, hmm?”

Was he…? That clever bastard. Roulan held her breath and watched Agent Tengfei’s face closely, releasing it in a relieved sigh when the man nodded.

“Of course,” Tengfei said slowly. “I’m sure quiet would help everyone,” he looked at both Katara and Jet significantly, “calm down.”
Master Xiu smiled and dropped his deceptively simple gaze to the bundle of blankets curled up and shivering by the stove. “Since your earthbending friend is still recovering from her bout with that Spirit fog,” he began easily, “I’ll offer the back garden for your use. It’s mostly empty at the moment if you need to discuss anything. Otherwise, I’d like you all to leave.”

“I’m awake,” Toph muttered from her blanket nest. “I heard everything.”

The blankets got slightly taller as the girl buried within them stood and began weaving her way through the clinic to the garden in the back. How the little blind brat managed to pull off stuff like that still boggled Roulan’s mind.

“I’ll make sure they keep their voices down,” Roulan said, crossing her arms. “Get GuoGuo back in here and I’ll take over watching the water so they don’t boil over.”

Master Xiu clicked his tongue “A watched pot never boils, Roulan,” he said, shaking his head as he turned to pull Journeyman GuoGuo in to replace Roulan on duty.

Roulan watched him go incredulously.

“Is he really always like that?” Tengfei asked.

She snorted. “Try living with him,” she scoffed. “You two,” she said, pointing to Katara and Jet who were somewhat behaving themselves for the moment. Although Jet looked like he was just barely keeping a lid on his temper. “To the back garden. Now.”

She waited until Tengfei marched the two brats after the little blanketed earthbender before falling into step behind them. Once they were all on the grass where she could keep a sharp eye on them, Roulan waved permission for Tengfei to remove his earthbent bindings on the children.

“Now,” she said, before either brat could raise their voices, “you want to fight? Fine. You’ll do it with your fists, feet, and teeth. You want to fight with bending? You go out front and do it in the plaza. You want to shout insults? Do it here but, for Yu Huang’s sake, keep your voices down. Understood?”

Honestly, it was a miracle she got them both to nod considering how viciously they were glaring at each other.


“Of course I did!” Katara snapped back, furious. “He’s Zuko! I got him before he could get me.”

“Oh really?” Jet snarked.

“Yes, really.”

“Then tell me, little miss perfect-in-every-way,” Jet sneered, crossing his arms and glaring down at Katara arrogantly, “what was Li,” he emphasized the name, “doing that was oh-so threatening to you?”

Katara sputtered. “It was… It doesn’t matter,” she said, regaining some of her energy. “I caught him off guard.”

“Meaning you froze him before he even had the chance to react,” Jet said, narrowing his eyes. “You know, like what you stopped me from doing when we broke up.”
“That,” Katara said, stabbing a finger at Jet’s chest, “was completely different. You were going to kill all those innocent people-”

Kill?!

“Like you were going to freeze Li to death,” Jet said.

“And suffocate.”

Everyone looked at the bundle of blankets where Toph’s head was beginning to emerge, her blind eyes fixed in the middle space between Jet and Katara.

“You froze his head too,” Toph said. “He couldn’t breathe.”

Jet lunged for Katara’s throat, only for a rock glove to snag the back of his shirt and haul him back. Katara received a similar treatment when she bent some of the water from the flask at her hip in retaliation causing the water to splash harmlessly on the ground.

“No bending,” Roulan said, glaring at Katara. She looked up at Tengfei and nodded her thanks. The Dai Li rolled his eyes in exasperation and she couldn’t help but agree, enthusiastically.

“You tried to murder him!” Jet snarled, his face twisted in a mask of fury.

“He’s tried to do the same to me and Aang for almost a year now!” Katara shout in exasperation.

“Oh that is rich,” Jet drawled. “I literally just talked to Aang-”

“You what?!” Katara cried in genuine shock.

“You know the Avatar?” Tengfei gasped, his focus snapping to Jet in surprise.

“The Avatar?” Roulan breathed.

“Oh yeah,” Jet said grinning viciously. “You know what he said, Katara? He said Li saved his life.”

Katara gawked in the ensuing silence. “That is a lie!”

“You calling Aang a liar, Katara?” Jet said, tilting his head tauntingly.

“No, but-”

“Well you just said what Aang said was a lie,” Jet said, shrugged casually.

“He’s telling the truth,” Toph said, her head fully out of her blanket nest now.

“Thank you Toph,” Jet said, waving at the little girl. “You wanna know something else, Katara? You wanna know what Li was doing out there? He was getting water for the place he works at.”

Katara scoffed. “Oh like Zuko would ever stoop to working anywhere,” she said, crossing her own arms.

“Are you for real right now?” Jet said. “His boss sent him and Jin to go get some water because they were running out. He works at a tea shop, Katara,” he said, leaning forward and biting out his words. “A fucking tea shop. He’s a waiter. Has been for a couple weeks now.”
“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

“And what was he doing before that?” Katara shot back.

“Working with his aunt and uncle as a potter,” Jet answered promptly. “I saw him there. He can’t work with clay to save his life but he can remember who ordered what, when, and where they were sitting without having to hear the order a second time or check the dining room to be sure of the customer’s seat. He blushes at just about everything, he stutters when he gets nervous, and he happens to be my boyfriend.”

Katara covered her face with her hands, rubbing vigorously. “I cannot believe this.”

“You attacked my boyfriend,” Jet growled. “You tried to murder my boyfriend.”

“He’s Fire Nation,” Katara said, her voice muffled by her hands.

“And you and Aang once told me that that wasn’t a good enough reason to kill someone,” Jet said.

“Jet,” Katara said, her voice sounding sad and a little bit desperate. “It’s not just that he’s Fire Nation.” She lifted her head and stared pleadingly at the boy in front of her. “He’s Zuko.”

Jet pursed his lips and shook his head. “I don’t care,” he said firmly. “He’s been Li for as long as he can remember and he’ll continue to be Li until he tells me otherwise.”

“What do you mean ‘for as long as he can remember’?” Katara demanded.

Jet flinched, standing taller and looking away. “He told me something in confidence,” he said. “I promised I wouldn't tell anyone.”

“You-” The waterbender stopped and held up a hand to stop Jet from talking while she processed. “I can’t believe this. I cannot believe this.”

“If you’re both done,” Roulan said when the silence began to drag, “I have a few questions.” No one objected. “Where are Li and Jin right now? If Li really was frozen, then he needs to be warmed up properly. The same goes for Jin.”

“That won’t be possible, I’m afraid,” Tengfei said grimly.

No. Oh no. Roulan met the Dai Li’s green gaze and felt her heart plummet.

“Why not?” Jet said, eyeing the green garbed agent warily. “Where’s Li?”

Tengfei sighed. “He’s been arrested with the girl Jin,” he said.

“What?!” Roulan watched as all the blood drained from Jet’s face and he started shaking. “No. No! But- He didn’t do anything!” Jet cried.

“That may be true,” Tengfei said, drawing the healer’s attention. “But Katara denounced him as Fire Nation in the open. There were witnesses. Several of those witnesses also saw the ice she froze him in turn to fog. We had to arrest him. We took Jin in as well to be sure she wasn’t an accomplice.”

Jet wobbled on his feet, staggering backwards a step. “But….” His voice was thin and wavering as mist. “But you said the Woman in White was there!” he said, his brown eyes sparkling with fearful
He didn’t,” Tengfei confirmed. “The Woman in White did.”

Roulan shuddered. Spirits. She knew of them. She respected them. But she never ever wanted to deal with them. The fact that a Spirit, a murderous Spirit had manifested so close to her clinic, her home, had left her shaken to the core. Knowing Li had been tangled up in that, and poor Jin too… She shook her head.

“But Women in White don’t kill like that,” Jet argued. “I’ve never heard of-” He stiffened. “Li. Did she hurt Li?”

Tengfei shook his head. “We managed to stop her before she could do anything to him,” he said. Why would a Woman in White go after Li? Unless Li was… unfaithful….

“Agent Duyi and his partner Honghui were assigned to watch Katara and Toph,” Tengfei explained.

Watch them? The Dai Li were watching Katara and Toph before all of this? Why?

“That damn Spirit murdered Duyi and slashed Honghui’s face,” the Dai Li said with a pained grimace. “It’s bad enough she’s targeted the people of this city. By taking the life of a Dai Li, she’s made all of us her personal enemy.”

“Wait,” Toph said, speaking up finally, “what do the Dai Li have to do with Spirits? I thought that was more of the Avatar’s thing.”

“In case you haven’t noticed,” Tengfei said, dropping his gaze to the little earthbender, “the Avatar’s been gone for the past century. The rest of the Spirits weren’t. We did the only thing we could do. Our job.”

“Okay. Then what’s a Woman in White?” Toph asked.

Tengfei opened his mouth to explain, then shut it and cleared his throat. Well if he wasn’t going to do it-

“She’s the Spirit of a woman of whose partner cheated on her when she was still alive,” Roulan said, propping her hands on her hips.

Agent Tengfei looked distinctly uncomfortable. He might not like discussing such things to a little girl, but Roulan was a healer. She sometimes had to tell children they were dying. Explaining someone couldn’t keep their penis in their pants was nothing by comparison.

“So she was Human before?” Toph asked, tilting her head up in Roulan’s general direction.

“She was, yes,” Roulan said easily. “If you’re faithful to your romantic partner, you don’t have anything to fear from her. If not…”

Jet snorted. “She went after Li, twice now,” he said, looking up at the Dai Li. “He never cheated. I don’t think he’s even capable of it. Besides, Li told you she wasn’t really a Woman in White anymore.”

“And the more I learn about her firsthand, the more I agree with that assessment,” Tengfei said.

“Li’s been helping you?” Roulan said. “Why is he involved with Spirits? Other than that fox Spirit
“Fox Spirits?” Katara blurted. “Wha- You mean that coyote-fox-thing? I swear it was talking.”

Toph and Jet snorted but it was Toph who spoke with a grin. “That’s ‘cause she was,” Toph said. “She’s not a coyote-fox. She’s a kitsune, a fox Spirit.” Her grin faded. “She’s a Knowledge Seeker of Wan Shi Tong.”

Finally, a Spirit name Roulan was familiar with. She watched as surprise was steadily replaced by dawning fear in Katara’s face. Why? The Knowledge Spirit wasn’t a particularly violent Spirit.

“Wan Shi Tong?” Katara breathed. “But firebenders destroyed part of his library—”

“They what?” Tengfei gasped.

“-why would he ally himself with Zuko of all people?” Katara continued. “Why would a Spirit want to have anything to do with Zuko at all?”

“Stop calling him that,” Jet said.

“It’s his name,” Katara shot back, earning her a glare from Jet which she ignored. “You don’t have to like it, but that’s the truth.”

“He’s not Zuko,” Jet insisted. “He’s Li. If you call him Zuko, he won’t answer.”

Katara shrugged. “That doesn’t change the fact that—”

“Look,” Tengfei said, raising his voice so he was heard, “it doesn’t matter right now what his name is. But I highly suggest you call him Li where someone, anyone else can hear you. ‘Zuko’ is a recognizably Fire Nation name.” His gaze caught Jet’s. “As is Zenko, for that matter.”

“I don’t care,” Jet hissed. “Where is Li?”

The Dai Li remained unmoved. “I can’t tell you that,” he said grimly. “I had Shanyuan be the one to arrest Li.” He held up a hand and the rock glove still holding onto Jet’s collar jerked the boy back before he could pounce at him. “He knows when to keep his mouth shut,” he said sharply. “Besides, Li has my Apprentice nearly convinced he’s a waterbender. Would you rather I let someone else take Li in? Someone who believed Katara’s word without any viable proof otherwise? Li was barely conscious and the Knowledge Seeker was nowhere to be seen. At least with Shanyuan there, he had a chance.”

Jet stopped trying to scratch out Tengfei’s eyes with hooked fingers but his glare remained vicious. “A chance, my ass. You want help dealing with that bitch Spirit? You’ll need Li’s help. And Zenko’s. Where is she? She should be here,” Jet demanded, turning his glare to Tengfei. “She’s never far from Li.”

“Li did something,” Toph said suddenly. “Zenko told Katara to shut her eyes. She kept the Spirit lady distracted long enough for the Dai Li to get there.”

“Zen- The fox spoke to you?” Roulan gasped in shock.

Toph nodded. “Well, not me specifically,” she admitted. “But I could hear her voice in my head. She was talking to the Spirit lady. But she didn’t call her a Woman in White. She called her Kuchisake-onna.” She jerked her head to Tengfei and pointed directly at the Dai Li’s chest. “You know what that means,” she declared. “You know and it scares you. Why?”
Roulan looked at the Dai Li and was unnerved when she saw genuine, unmistakable terror in the man’s face pulling the thin, ropy scar on his right cheek taught. She had never heard of any Spirit called a Kuchisake-onna. It sounded like a Fire Nation Spirit. But Tengfei certainly recognized the Spirit. Recognized and feared.

“Agent,” Roulan said. “What is it?”

The Dai Li tried to form words but failed. Swallowing roughly, he said in a rough voice, “A hunter. Her victims die. With very few exceptions. And most of those exceptions prefer death after what she does to them.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “If she speaks to you, do not answer. Just run. Run and find a Dai Li to deal with her. She will kill you otherwise. Damn. We’ve been hunting a spider when we should have been hunting an enraged dillo-lion.”
Inform

Chapter Summary

In which Tengfei tries to act wisely while Shanyuan is scared stiff.

Chapter Notes

A.N: I meant to post this yesterday but this chapter fought me tooth and nail. I got it finished today. Sorry for the delay friends. T_T

A Kuchisake-onna. A Kuchisake-onna. Of all things to change into, that blasted Woman in White just had to become the Slit-Faced Woman. She was a dangerous and blessedly rare Spirit. It took a significant amount of hatred to change anyone into a Kuchisake-onna. It took so much more to change a preexisting Spirit into one.

So yes, Tengfei was terrified to say the least. He had no idea what to do. So he followed procedure. He left Katara in the capable hands of Master Ye Xiu. He knew the Master Healer would keep the Avatar’s waterbending teacher busy with healing the ill patients from the toxic water. They would also help make sure Katara and Toph were safely warmed up.

Jet had been another problem entirely. Considering how rashly the boy had acted so far today, Tengfei wasn’t taking any chances. He’d left Jet bound by his rock gloves in the Autumn Leaf Clinic under the watchful eye of Roulan. The Journeyman Healer had a good head on her shoulders and Tengfei was more than certain she could handle just about anything thrown at her.

The boy had been anything but enthused by his situation, but Tengfei didn’t care. He needed Jet out of the way. The last thing he or his comrades needed was some civilian getting mixed up in a Spiritual mess, especially with the Fire Prince himself involved.

Of course, that was if Katara’s word was to be trusted.

He turned and met the waterbender’s gaze with his own as he walked out of the clinic. The girl may be young, but she was no doubt a Master level waterbender. Tengfei had no reason to doubt that. The Avatar himself had chosen her to train him in waterbending. Tengfei had read reports of her prowess from the Dai Li agents assigned to keep an eye on the Avatar’s little gang of friends. Turning away, Tengfei stepped outside to join his comrades outside.

Nevertheless, he still found it hard to believe that the Fire Prince was inside the walls of Ba Sing Se. It was unreal and shook him to his very core. Fire Prince Zuko may not be the Dragon of the West, but he was the crown prince of Fire Lord Ozai. Although Tengfei had only read of royalty going underground as spies in Spirit tales, he wasn’t about to put anything past Sozin’s line. That lineage was notorious for pulling off the terrible and unimaginable.

Like wiping an entire race from existence in one day. He shuddered.
But was that really what was bothering him? Tengfei grimaced. Or was it the thought of Li being the Fire Prince? It all seemed too fantastical. He’d met Li several times now and the boy had never struck him as anything more than a fearful refugee trying to keep himself out of trouble while stumbling headlong into it every time he turned around.

Katara had been adamant that Li was Fire Prince Zuko, however. As a Master level Dai Li, Tengfei was allowed to read up on politics outside Ba Sing Se, within reason. It would never do to miss something significant, like the war suddenly ending. Fat chance, but still. He knew who Zuko was, but he also knew most uneducated people wouldn’t. Zuko was a Fire Nation name and Zuko may be the name of the Fire Nation’s prince, but to put those two labels on someone as awkward as Li? Tengfei could believe it, maybe. But would other people? Doubtful. Hopefully.

It was that slim hope that drove him to warn Katara to keep her mouth shut about that little tidbit. Hopefully the presence of Roulan and the other innocents in the clinic would help keep the girl silent. Tengfei needed to process the new information and think carefully on his next move. He didn’t want to believe Katara was right, but on the off-chance she was…

If Li really was Fire Prince Zuko, then that raised so many questions. Just a few being: what was he doing here, how did he get here, and why did Wan Shi Tong decide to trust him enough to make a deal with him?

Damn. He still had to juggle that piece of information too. The Knowledge Seeker still hadn’t shown herself since Li’s arrest and that worried Tengfei. The last time he’d seen Li -or was it Zuko now?- without the Knowledge Seeker by his side, the Woman in White had attempted to entice him. The boy had banished her and warned Tengfei that the Spirit was changing. Why would he do that if he was the Fire Prince? Why help the city his country had besieged for years?

Clearly, Wan Shi Tong had seen something in Li- er, Zuko that made him trust the boy, Fire Prince or not. Especially after firebenders had destroyed part of his library. Why would the Fire Nation do such a terrible thing? All that history, lost. And yet The Knowledge Spirit had still trusted Li. That had to mean something. Tengfei had to believe that.

This was never a situation Tengfei ever dreamed he’d find himself in nor would he wish it on anyone. He’d been honest when he told Jet his reasoning behind sending Shanyuan with Li. Tengfei trusted his Apprentice. Shanyuan may be enthusiastic, but he could be discreet. Nevertheless, Tengfei had never been so thrilled to find out Shanyuan hadn’t arrived on the scene until after more Dai Li agents had arrived to help contain the Kuchisake-onna.

The Spirit may have escaped; but knowing what he did now, Tengfei wasn’t surprised. It would take more than rock gloves and iron chains to put a Kuchisake-onna down. Shanyuan didn’t have the training or field experience to excuse putting him on the field to face her. Once again, Tengfei felt intense relief knowing he’d sent his apprentice after Jin and Li to Lake Laogai. Shanyuan should be safe there.

“Agent Tengfei.”

Immediately, Tengfei straightened and nodded respectfully to his commanding officer. “Agent Aiguo,” he said.

Aiguo was a an older Dai Li with more gray in his hair than the black he’d been born with. He was very rarely fielded anymore. He’d served Ba Sing Se long enough to deserve retirement, but he’d chosen to handle intelligence distribution at a desk instead. Seeing him here meant Long Feng had taken an interest in this situation. Yu Huang have mercy.
“Did you take care of that ridiculous informant of yours?” Aiguo asked, his tone making it very clear how he felt about that little incident.

Tengfei hid a wince, but rolled his eyes and nodded. “He’s brazen,” he said, controlling his nervous energy with a valiant effort, “but he’s efficient.”

“A refugee trusting the Dai Li,” Aiguo said, turning away from Tengfei to study the bloody ground when Duyi’s body had been. “How very unusual.”

“Not necessarily,” Tengfei said, remaining where he stood. “Some refugees do trust us.” He tilted his head in reluctant agreement. “To an extent.”

“Oh? And who might these few be?” Dark brown eyes flashed to Tengfei.

Tengfei met his superior’s gaze evenly. “Those who’ve met a Spirit face-to-face and survived,” he said, lifting an eyebrow at Agent Aiguo’s surprise. “Jet is on good terms with a Knowledge Seeker of Wan Shi Tong and,” he hesitated, “his boyfriend has had dealings with the Kuchisake-onna,” Aiguo’s blanched in shock, “and lived to tell about it.”

“Kuchisake-onna?!” Master Aiguo said, drawing the immediate attention of the other agents in the plaza. “Where did you hear his, Tengfei?” Aiguo demanded fiercely, turning to face Tengfei fully.

“Apparently,” Tengfei said, aware of his audience listening with rapt interest, “the Knowledge Seeker was present when the Kuchisake-onna attacked and tried to defend her ward. The Avatar’s earthbending teacher heard everything.”

“Ward?” Aiguo repeated incredulously, obviously still reeling from the Kuchisake-onna bomb. “Knowledge Seekers are Spirits. They don’t take Humans on as wards.”

“This one has,” Tengfei said firmly. “She’s rather protective of him too.”

Dark eyes narrowed. “You’ve met him,” the elderly Dai Li said.

“I have,” Tengfei said, tilting his head in a nod. “Three times. Never for very long. I did not think much of it the first time since we were in the library and it is not uncommon to see Wan Shi Tong’s foxes there.” Aiguo nodded and Tengfei hid his relief. “Then last night, the then-Woman in White tried to entice him in front of me and my apprentice. The boy banished the Spirit and set up a barrier of his own.”

Interest sparked in Agent Aiguo’s eyes which was a point in Tengfei’s favor. Now for the delicate part of the report.

“I don’t know much about him,” Tengfei admitted with a hint of reluctance, “other than he’s a waterbender who was able to notice the Woman in White was changing her nature before we did.”

“Is that so?” Aiguo murmured thoughtfully. “Does he have a name?”

“Li,” Tengfei said nodding. “Although,” he added, resisting the desire to look over his shoulder at the clinic, “it would seem the Avatar’s waterbending teacher has declared him… otherwise.”

Instantly, Agent Aiguo’s gaze sharpened dangerously. Tengfei sent a silent prayer up to Yu Huang for patience and confidence. He would need every bit if he planned on weathering this mess in one piece.

“The firebender,” Aiguo said, his tone deceptively calm.
“Waterbender,” Tengfei said firmly.

The elder studied Tengfei closely, gauging his words and demeanor for any sign of deception.
“Why are you so sure he’s a waterbender?” Aiguo asked.

Here we go. “I saw him make ice, sir,” Tengfei declared. “Last night when the Spirit attacked him. My apprentice was there with me.” He lifted an eyebrow. “I doubt a firebender is capable of pulling something like that off.”

Truth. It was all true. Just… not. Even though Tengfei still had absolutely no idea how Li had done it, the fact remained that he had. Tengfei did his best to appear firm and certain without allowing his tension and nerves to bleed through his facade.

Aiguo hummed and deliberately looked down where Agent Duyi’s body had been. “And yet…”

Tengfei followed his superior’s gaze. “If the earthbender Toph is correct and this Spirit really is a Kuchisake-onna,” and yes, that was definitely a twitch of fear in Agent Aiguo’s face, “then we need to warn Long Feng. He needs to know what we’re dealing with.”

“Agreed,” the elder Dai Li murmured. He closed his eyes and muttered a soft prayer to Yu Huang for Duyi’s departed spirit. Tengfei couldn’t help but add his own silent prayer to his elder’s. Duyi had been a good agent with an easy smile and clever mind. He would be missed.

“I understand your apprentice accompanied the others to Lake Laogai,” Aiguo said.

Tengfei nodded. “He did,” he said. “Shanyuan also saw Li make ice and witnessed the boy banish the Spirit. I suspect the boy could be a Natural.” He met his superior’s gaze. “Whether he is or not, this is the second time the Spirit has appeared close to him. I want to know why a Kuchisake-onna seems to have taken such an unusual amount of interest in the boy. He could be a useful informant in the future or,” he hesitated, “bait. Should we need such a thing. I had Shanyuan go with him to keep an eye on him.”

Jet had been right. Li had proven surprisingly intuitive where this particular Spirit was concerned. Tengfei wanted to know why and if Li could be just as intuitive with other Spirits. If so, then the Dai Li could use him. Tengfei hadn’t been lying about that. Naturals were too few and far between to just kill them because of what element they bent. Not without good reason, anyway.

He could only pray Long Feng didn’t decide Li should be… bent into helping. Tengfei strongly doubted Wan Shi Tong, not to mention the Knowledge Seeker Zenko, would be willing to let such an intrusion pass without reprisal.

Yu Huang… Agni, hell, Wan Shi Tong, if you can hear this. Watch Li. Ba Sing Se is my city. If Li can help protect it, then I’ll protect him.

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A map of the underground waterways. Of all the random things to ask for. Shanyuan stared at the vast expanse of the Dai Li’s library. Most of the scrolls, artifacts, and documents stored in here were carefully maintained, controlled, and studied. It wasn’t the only cache, there were others scattered throughout the city in designated safe houses, but it was the only cache located in the Dai Li’s command center.

Unfortunately, that meant it was vulnerable to groundwater leaking down from Lake Laogai above. Every Dai Li was trained to sense and if necessary reinforce the stone surrounded this chamber
upon entry. If everything else in this base was compromised, this room must remain safe.

Shanyuan spread his chi into the stone, feeling for any weakness or vulnerability in the stone. Thankfully, there were none that he could detect. Satisfied, he moved to the map drawers. The map of waterways in the various sectors of Ba Sing Se was in the third drawer from the bottom. Shanyuan carefully pulled out the map, checked it for any damage, rolled it up, and tied it securely with one of the ribbons from the available pile.

He made sure to bend the stone down behind him when he stepped out into the tunnel, sealing the cache chamber. Clutching the map close to him, Shanyuan hurried down the tunnel to the main chamber of the underground bunker. He had to pull up short when he saw a Joo Dee approaching. The mindbent woman was smiling unnaturally broadly and escorting a glassy eyed young girl.

Jin. Shanyuan grimaced and braced himself as he strode towards them. He didn’t think he’d ever come to terms with seeing someone as young as Jin in a mindbent trance. It may be part of the job, but… Well, it wasn’t pleasant. Knowing there was always the lingering chance that he would have to either subject someone else or be subjected to mindbending himself haunted his nightmares. It may be necessary, but that didn’t mean it was even remotely pleasant.

“Good evening,” the Joo Dee said politely.

He nodded in reply and strode past them. He couldn’t help but look back at the women’s retreating backs before the sound of moving stone pulled his attention away. He looked at the source of the sound and was startled to see several Dai Li run out into the main chamber. Unsure and confused by the unusual actions of his comrades, Shanyuan stopped walking and tried to make sense of the abrupt jump in activity.

“What’s going on?” he asked the first Dai Li to run close by him.

The agent paused just long enough to answer. “The Woman in White. She’s here.”

“What?” Shanyuan gasped. “But... But that doesn’t make sense.”

He watched the Dai Li’s retreating back, trying to understand what was going on. They weren’t anywhere near the canal. Then again, that well in the Lower Ring wasn’t anywhere near the canal either. Unless…

He undid the tie and unrolled the map of underground waterways, swiftly finding the Woman in White’s canal. He drew his finger along the waterway, noting where the flow dipped back underground before joining a subterranean reservoir, directly below the well in the Lower Ring. But… Jumping back to the canal, Shanyuan followed the waterway back uphill to its source. Lake Laogai.

Damn. She could travel using the waterways. But how?! Women in White were locked to the general area where they died, lingering until they had killed their unfaithful spouse or, if they hadn’t received the proper rites, until their bodies were properly disposed of according to their heritage’s culture. The Dai Li had scoured the canal for the Woman in White’s body, but had come up empty every time.

There were too many inconsistencies with this Spirit. That boy, Li, had said the Spirit wasn’t a Woman in White anymore. Shanyuan had dismissed the notion. Spirits didn’t change. Ever.

But this one clearly had. Her previous victims had all been drowned, but Agent Duyi had been nearly decapitated. Shanyuan swallowed back to bile that soured the back of his throat. Something
had definitely changed.

He had to tell Long Feng and Master Tengfei. He had to warn the-

A shriek jolted him out of his burgeoning panic. Whirling around, Shanyuan froze. She was here. She was here.

The girl Jin had been the one to shriek. Her hands covered her mouth now, muffling her terrified whimpers and staring with wide, unglazed eyes at the Spirit standing directly in front of the Joo Dee. The Spirit murmured something softly to which the Joo Dee replied with an enthusiastic, “Of course.”

Then… then… Shanyuan felt sick because how did he miss that?! The slash cleaving the Spirit’s face from ear to ear. Jin screamed again, staggering backwards. Shanyuan wanted to go to her. He wanted to help her, wanted to move but he couldn’t. He was too scared. Too cold. He’d been training for this. He should react not freeze up like this.

“How ‘bout now?” the Spirit purred and Yu Huang help him, Shanyuan found himself helplessly leaning towards the voice.

“Oh yes,” Joo Dee replied. Was that fear in her voice? “Most definitely.”

The Spirit smiled and Shanyuan choked because her whole face split apart in a macabre facsimile of something that should have been alluring but chilled the blood in his veins. Then metal sang and earth rumbled and green eyes flashed-
He couldn’t keep his thoughts straight. They kept slipping… away…

Find her.

Who? Who was he supposed to… Woman in White. But she wasn’t… not anymore… why?

Find her.

Water. She hunted through the water. He had to find water.

Find her.

Stone rumbled but he didn’t flinch or slow. He had to look, to listen, to feel, to find. He’d asked him to. The man who asked so many questions -he shouldn’t have answered!- had asked him to find the Spirit who wasn’t a Woman in White. He had to look. He could hear her in a strange, distant sort of way. Almost like…

Find her.

What was he thinking? Why couldn’t he…? Where was she?

:Fire:.

There. So close. Where… Up?

:Come to me, little bird. I can show you peace.: 

“Where are you?” he whispered. Stone above him. Not water. He was confused. Unless above the
“I’m not an earthbender. I can’t come to you.”

:No? Then I shall come to you.:  
He tilted his head. “How?”

A scream.

“Sir, what is he doing?” Agent Guotin asked, staring at the entranced firebender suspiciously.

Long Feng followed the prisoner’s gaze to the stone ceiling and frowned. “I don’t know,” he replied. “But I think we can assume the Spirit is-”

A scream ripped through the echoing stone chambers of the Dai Li headquarters at the same time the hairs on the back of Long Feng’s neck stood on end.

“She’s here!” he cursed. “Come boy!”

The firebender moved, keeping pace with Long Feng and Agent Guotin. His glazed eyes remained fixed ahead of him with just the slightest hint of emotion flickering there. Once again, Long Feng wondered how thoroughly the boy was entranced. It would be most unpleasant if the boy broke free of the mindbending in the middle of a battle. There was no telling which side he would take.

They rounded the corner and the mindbent firebender was suddenly at the very back of Long Feng’s mind. The Spirit was here, but she was most definitely not a Woman in White. Next to him, Agent Guotin cursed colorfully and launched his rock gloves at the Spirit. He wasn’t fast enough.

The abominable Spirit slashed her narrow blade across the hapless Joo Dee’s face. The force of her strike snapped the Joo Dee’s head to the side revealing a ripped, bloody slash where the mindbent woman’s mouth used to be. Joo Dee screeched and collapsed in a heap on the ground, clawing at her face.

Long Feng had only ever read about such wounds and the malicious Spirit who dealt them. He’d thought them unique to the Fire Nation as there was so no record of them appearing anywhere that was controlled by another country. Yet here she was, in his city, murdering his people.

The girl the Dai Li had arrested with Li-Jin, that was her name- was staring at the fallen Joo Dee and covering her mouth to muffle her horrified screams. The Spirit moved and was suddenly right there in front of the girl.

“Child of Earth. Why are you in such a place?”

The girl was shivering in terror. Long Feng may have had her arrested, but she had been ultimately innocent. The meant she was a citizen of his city, someone he’d sworn an oath to protect.

“Kuchisake-onna!” Long Feng shouted, drawing the Spirit’s attention.

He crouched and pushed the earth, propelling a boulder out of the ground and straight at the monster. For a moment, it seemed as if the Spirit’s poisonous green eyes flickered with disdain before she vanished. The stone crashed into the wall by the Human girl’s face, ripping another scream from her.

Where! Where did the Spirit disappear to?
“On your guard, men!” Long Feng commanded. “It’s a Kuchisake-onna.”

The Dai Li in the vicinity immediately leapt into action, readying their iron chains. The iron would burn the Spirit if it made contact, but it would not hold it for long. The Kuchisake-onna would not be easy to defeat. There actually wasn’t any details about how to defeat such a Spirit that Long Feng could remember reading in the Dai Li’s records. It seemed the Kuchisake-onna had been rare even in Avatar Kyoshi’s time.

Damn.

“You came.”

Hair standing on end, Long Feng spun and bent his own rock gloves out, halting them just short of the firebender’s face. His eyes widened when he saw the Kuchisake-onna draped over the firebender’s shoulders, her horrific face nuzzling his scarred cheek. He held up a hand, stopping his Dai Li from attacking.

This may be his chance to understand what was going on.

“Of course,” the Spirit murmured, looping her arms around the firebender’s chest so her hands pressed against where his heart would be. “I told you I would. I keep my promises. I am faithful.”

That… sounded more like a Woman in White than a Kuchisake-onna. The boy had said the Spirit may have begun as a Woman in White. If that was true, then perhaps there was enough of the original Spirit left over to deal with her. Permanently.

“There is no sunlight here,” she whispered in the firebender’s scarred ear. “No warmth. No Fire. No Knowledge Seeker to keep me at bay.” Damaged lips pressed against the firebender’s scar.

“Come with me. Let me show you peace.”

The Dai Li twitched and Long Feng clenched his upheld fist, silently commanding them to be still. This didn’t make sense. All records of the Kuchisake-onna said she hunted her victims, asked them an unanswerable question, then killed them. Why wasn’t she doing that now? What did she want?

“No.”

Unearthly green eyes opened, dark lashes still brushing wraith pale cheeks.

“Not until you tell me who betrayed you.”

Good. This could be their chance to find the Kuchisake-onna’s weakness. Keep going boy.

“Why do you wish to know?” the Kuchisake-onna asked, her gentle tone edged with the same razor blade as the knife she still held in her right hand. The same hand that currently pressed against the firebender’s heart.

“You said we were a matched set,” the firebender said, sadness impossibly tinging his words. “That we were both betrayed by someone we trusted.” Pale gold blinked slowly as something like tears pooled in the corner of his good eye. “I can’t remember who my betrayer was. But you do. Let me help you.”

What was he-

“You would do that, little bird?” the Spirit murmured, slipping around the firebender’s body with a grace no Human could mimic. “You would help me have my vengeance?”
Damn. If the boy saw her face, he was done for.

“Li!”

Startled, Long Feng instinctively turned to the voice. Why hadn’t the stupid girl run when she had the chance?

“Li! Wake up!” Jin shouted.

Green the shade of the glowing crystals, and just as sharp, narrowed dangerously when they beheld the mindbent glaze over pale gold. “What’s wrong with your eyes?” she hissed.

Long Feng jerked his attention back to the Spirit, releasing his fist and the Dai Li attacked-

Fire!

Heat blazed as a swatch of red-gold flame exploded into existence between the Dai Li and the Spirit, knocking the thrown rock gloves aside and shattering them as if they were mere pebbles. But how-?! Fire faded and pale, Fire Nation gold eyes sparked with life and consciousness and fear. Damn that Spirit to Agni’s fire. She’d broken the mindbent trance!

“Don’t attack her!”

What?

“Don’t attack her,” the firebender commanded again, holding out his hands palms out in a sign of peace. “Let me speak to her. Please.”

This was insane.

Long Feng met Agent Guotin’s gaze and the Dai Li nodded. Iron chains flew out from dozens of green sleeves, tangling around the Kuchisake-onna’s corporeal form. The Spirit screamed as wraith pale skin burned angry red where iron touched.

“No! Stop! Please,” Li cried, grabbing the chains and trying to pull them off the Spirit.

Something grabbed the back of his collar and yanked him back and away from the fray. He landed on the ground hard enough to make his ears ring. Why? Why were they attacking!? What was going on? Where was he? When- How did he get here?

“Li!”

Jin! He sat up too quickly and promptly keeled over as the blood drained from his head to his feet. His vision abruptly tunneled and his mouth felt like it was made of cotton. His head and fingers tingled but he managed to catch himself on his forearms before his face smacked the ground. Dainty hands grabbed his shoulders and shook him gently.

“Li?” he heard Jin call. “Li!”

“M okay,” he muttered as his vision cleared and he lifted his head. Something thumped dully against his back before crumbling. He turned around and saw the remnants of a rock glove lying in
pieces on the ground where he’d just lain. He was so confused. “What’s going on?”

“The Dai Li got us,” Jin said, hauling him to his feet. “We need to get out of here before that thing attacks us.”


:Fire. You said you would help me.:  

He shuddered as the Spirit’s words infiltrated his mind like it had in the ice. His grip on Jin tightened but he didn’t look away.

:I seek vengeance.; the Spirit said, unleashing a ear-piercing wail that rang through the stone cavern like a death knell. :Give that to me, little firebird. A life for a life. The traitor for my children. Do this and I will ease your escape.;

He couldn’t… But he had offered. He gulped, eyes wide. "Don't kill them," he pleaded. "Please. Promise you won't kill them!"

The Spirit hissed, wrapped a long-nailed hand around an iron chain, snarling when the iron burned her, and flung off two of her attackers with ease.

"Promise you won't kill them!” Li cried, staggering. "Promise me and I'll help you get your vengeance."

The Spirit stilled and met his gaze with her own, cold emerald fire glowing with all the hatred, anger, sadness of a bereaved mother.

“Deal.”

Her wail became a laugh that chased Li and Jin as they raced, hand in hand, through the stone caverns. Li had no idea where he was going and neither did Jin, but they were not with the Spirit and that’s all that mattered. The memory of the squalling Joo Dee, writhing on the ground with her face slashed just like the Spirit’s...

“Kuchisake-onna,” he whispered, feeling dread creep into his spirit and take root. “She’s a Kuchisake-onna.”

And he’d made a deal with her.

“I don’t care what she is,” Jin snapped, frightened but determined. “I’m not letting her do that to me.”

Li certainly couldn’t argue with that.

“Wait!”

Li hesitated, looking back over his shoulder but Jin didn’t stop and he was forced to stumbled after her or jerk them both to a stop. And stopping was something neither of them wanted to do.

“Wait!”

The voice was familiar but Li couldn’t- Grrk!

Both he and Jin choked as rock hard fists grabbed handfuls of their clothes and yanked them to a
“No!” Jin cried, gripping Li’s hand and flailing for a handhold, foothold, anything. “No!”

Li held onto Jin’s hand, trying to dig his feet into the ground to slow down their backwards movement. No good. Gritting his teeth, he planted one foot, turned with his right hand clawed and ready to rake heat away from a body-

“Shanyuan?! he gasped. His shock only lasted a second before he began struggling again.

“Wait!” the young Dai Li commanded again, his stance firm and rooted. His eyes were wide enough for Li to see white surrounding the earthen brown irises. “Please wait!”

It was the fear tinging the Dai Li’s command that made Jin slow her struggles. She turned and glared at her captor, fully prepared to let loose a deluge of angry words. Except then the stone fist clinging to her let go, as did the glove holding onto to Li, and returned to Shanyuan’s shaking hands.

“That thing,” Shanyuan gasped. “What was that? You’re a firebender but you made ice and that- that thing?! You know!” he shouted, pointing at Li. “You know what that was. That- She- That Joo Dee- Wha- What was that thing?!” Shanyuan cried in a voice that was almost more sob than shout.

Agni, the Dai Li looked like he was coming apart at the seams from terror. “She’s a Kuchisake-onna,” Li said, swallowing over a fright dried throat. “If you see her, run. Don’t talk to her. Just run. Throw something at her if you can. If she speaks to you, do not answer her. She will kill you whether by her own blade or by destroying your sanity.”

Jin was shaking and Agni have mercy if Li wasn’t shaking just as badly. Shanyuan looked like he was going to collapse and empty his stomach. Shanyuan may be a Dai Li but Li wouldn’t wish a death at the hands of the Kuchisake-onna on his worst enemy.

“Come with us,” he said.

“What?!” Jin cried. “Li, no! He’s Dai Li!”

“Would you rather he stay here?”

Jin blanched, her soft brown eyes flashing back to Shanyuan. “No,” she whispered. “But-”

“Shanyuan,” Li said. “Is Tengfei here?”

The young Dai Li gulped but managed to shake his head mutely.

Good. “Then come with us,” Li said fiercely. “Tengfei needs to know about the Kuchisake-onna. Someone needs to tell him.” He held out his hand. “Come with us. No one can blame you for leaving. You’re spreading the word.”

“But-”

“Shanyuan,” Li commanded, jolting the earthbender from his panic, “come with me and live, or stay and die.” The young Dai Li flinched. “You’re not trained enough to fight her. You know that. I know that. You’re Tengfei’s apprentice. Tell your Master what’s happening. He needs to know.”

Shanyuan shuddered. “This isn’t what I was trained to do,” he said, wrapping his arms around himself. “I- I’m supposed to stay and fight and-”
"You’re an Apprentice, Shanyuan," Jin said suddenly. "An apprentice! No sane Master expects an apprentice to do a Master’s job. None! But your Master needs to know what happened. It’s your duty as an Apprentice to tell your Master about a problem. Now come on!"

Jin broke free from Li’s gasp, snagged Shanyuan’s sleeve, and pulled him along behind them. She took Li’s hand with her other hand and together the three of them fled down one of the tunnels branching off from the main cavern. Another shrieking wail chased after them at the same time dark elongated shadows and pounding feet advanced on them from the ahead of them.

Before either Li or Shanyuan could react, Jin yanked the boys towards a wood and metal door along the wall.

“Open it,” she commanded.

“I don’t have the key,” Shanyuan said, shaking his head frantically.

Jin stomped her foot. “But you can bend th-”

“Move,” Li commanded.

He nudged Jin aside and pressed a hand over the metal latch. He felt the cool metal heat under his hand. It took more effort than he thought it would to keep the heat contained within the metal so it couldn’t burn his hand. In, hold, out. The metal latch snapped off in his hand.

He and Shanyuan slammed their shoulders against the door, forcing it open and tumbling inside. Jin didn’t wait for them to recover before quickly turning and shutting the door firmly behind them. Li and Shanyuan pressed against the wood with her, fully prepared to hold it shut should they need to.

They listened intently as the rushing feet of the Dai Li thumped past their hiding spot towards Long Feng and the Kuchisake-onna. Only when the hallway beyond was silent once more, aside from the Joo Dee’s screaming, the Kuchisake-onna’s wailing, and the occasional cry of a Dai Li agent, did the three slump in relief.

“Don’t relax yet,” Jin said, her eyes gleaming in the eerie light of the glowing green crystals. “We still need to get out of… here…”

Braced for the worst, Li turned and followed Jin’s dumbstruck gaze. Erk! "Wha- What by Agni’s flaming teeth is that thing?!" he cried.

The beast lifted it enormous head, opened its massive mouth and… oh Agni the thing could swallow all three of them whole! A low bellow reverberated through the cavern. Agni. They’d escaped the fangs of one danger and run headlong into another. Jin shrank against the door with a whimper. Li and Shanyuan looked at each other, then turned their bodies so they could keep Jin out of sight and protected. If that monster wanted them, they would make sure Jin had a chance to escape.

A heavy thud shook the ground and chains rattled-
Flying Bison

Chapter Summary

In which Li, Shanyuan, and Jin free an animal, meet a pseudo-animal, and fly. Shanyuan is not enthused.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry about not updating the past couple days. I found out Monday was my roomie's birthday the day of. So I had to go get her a card and cake because duh she's my roommate, of course I'm going to celebrate it. Then Tuesday I went out with friends for dinner after trivia and Wednesday I lazed watching Book 3 of AtLA again. So I'm posting this today.

Also, this chapter fought me every inch. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get the licks in this chapter. The scene has been written and will be in the next chapter. It just didn't fit in this chapter for flow purposes. Oops.

...chains?

Warily, Li peaked over his shoulder. The beast was huge, but all six -six?!- of its legs were chained to the ground. The creature opened its mouth again and let out a bellow that almost sounded forlorn. Large brown eyes gazed at him with fear and hurt, not anger and hunger.

Hesitantly, Shanyuan too lifted his head and looked over his shoulder at the beast. He tipped back his black and green hat to get a better look and sat up slowly. Jin uncurled from between the two boys and stared at the furry beast with wide, light brown eyes that sparkled with confusion and compassion.

“This may sound like a stupid question,” Jin began, glancing significantly at the young Dai Li to her right, “but why is it chained up like that?”

Li stared at Jin incredulously. Why was it chained up? The thing was huge. Man-eating monster or not, it could still easily crush them to death.

“I…” Slowly, rock gloved hands held out in a pacifying gesture towards the creature, Shanyuan got to his feet. “I think I know what it is,” he said. As he moved closer to the animal, his eyes grew wider in recognition.

“What?” Jin asked, getting to her feet.

Not one to be left out, Li scrambled to his feet as well. “I think the question we should be asking,” he said dryly, “is does it matter?”

“Li!” Jin said, staring at him in hurt shock. “It’s chained up. The poor thing must be terrified.”
They were talking about the same creature… right? Big? Fuzzy? Enormous mouth? Six legs? Could easily fit all three of them in its mouth with room to spare?

“I think it’s the Avatar’s bison,” Shanyuan murmured in awe, his voice carrying in the bare stone cavern.

“The Avatar?” Jin and Li cried at the same time.

“No way!” Jin exclaimed, rushing after Shanyuan, but being careful to keep her movements in full view of the frightened creature. She also never stepped foot between Shanyuan and the bison, Li notice wryly. So she was impressed and awed, but within reason. Okay, so she hadn’t taken complete leave of her senses.

Blinking and shaking his head, Li looked up at the great animal warily. This was the Avatar’s bison. Why would the Avatar need a bison? What, was it the Avatar’s pet maybe? Transport? Who would ride a bison anyway? They were so slow. Ostrich-horses and eel-hounds were much quicker. He blinked, taken aback by that sudden thought. Eel-hounds? What were... He could see the Fire Nation creature in his head, but he couldn’t remember where he’d seen it before. Or when. He sighed. Not important right now.

Reluctantly, he caught up with Jin and Shanyuan. The beast hadn’t really moved from the stream of golden sunlight it stood in, watching the three Humans with distrust. The closer Li got to the bison, the more something in his being pulled at him, begging him to move even closer. Why? Why would-

Sunlight. It was the sunlight. He must be Moon-touched. Why hadn’t he noticed that before? Sunlight meant outside. Outside meant an escape route. But also light, warmth, energy, fire, Agni! Sunlight, every cell in his body sang for it. It was like an insistent need that tugged at his heart and demanded he hurry up and go there now!

He barely heard Jin calling him as he ran passed Shanyuan and into Agni’s embrace. He barely noticed the beast anymore even though he was aware of how close he was to it. He stepped into the sunlight and fell to his knees, head thrown back. Heat. Sunlight. Energy. Life. It washed over him just like it had when he first woke to his new life in the ghost town. It cleared the fuzziness in his head and filled the ache in his heart he hadn’t realized had been gnawing at him since he’d woken up underground just minutes ago.

Agni. Agni!

The Great Spirit’s name thrummed in his mind to the beat of his heart like a prayer without end. He’d been so cold. He hadn’t even noticed it anymore.

“Li?”

Jin’s small hands rested on his shoulders and warmth pressed against his back. He leaned into the warmth and gentle fingers feathering through his hair. It reminded him of something precious, something lost, something…

Mother.

“It’s okay,” Jin whispered, holding him close to her breast. “It’s okay. We’re going to get out of here. We will.”

“She’s right,” Shanyuan said. He didn’t sound as frightened as he had been, although the fear was
still evident in his jerky movements and wary glances he cast over his shoulder at the door. “If this is the Avatar’s bison, then if we free it, we might be able to fly out of here.”

“Fly?” Li and Jin gasped, staring at the Dai Li Apprentice in disbelief.

“This thing,” Li said slowly, pointing to the large, heavy beast, “flies?”

Shanyuan flushed, cracked a crooked smile, and made a head-shake-shrug motion that Li took to mean yeah-I-know-it’s-weird-but-yeah. Li blinked and stared at the creature incredulously. There was no way.

Li lifted his head and gazed up at the sky at the top of the stone tunnel. So far. So far away. The great beast also looked up and moaned mournfully at the distant sky. Well, at least they shared something in common.

“We’ll have to break its chains then,” he said stepping around the bison to the chained legs. “Jin, try to keep it calm. It probably won’t like this.”

He lit a fire in his cupped palm and knelt to start working on the manacles with Shanyuan. Suddenly, the metal clanged and jerked at the same time the bison unleashed a frightened bellow. Li flinched back and looked at the bison which was staring straight at the flame in his hand. So even the Avatar’s bison feared Fire. Swallowing back a lump of hurt, Li smothered the flame.

“Wait, we need that,” Shanyuan said. “I can’t bend metal.”

“Try doing what you did with the door lock,” Jin said in a soothing voice pitched to calm the bison. She brushed the animal’s dirty fur on its head in soft, even strokes. “You didn’t use a flame then.”

“Good idea,” Shanyuan said, looking at Li. “You get the three on this side, I’ll get the other side.”

Li hesitated then nodded, watching the Dai Li hurry to the other side of the bison. Cupping the metal between his hands, he willed the iron to heat to a red hot glow. It took a significant amount of concentration to keep siphoning the dangerous heat away from his skin so he didn’t burn himself.

When he deemed the metal weak enough, he breathed. In, hold, out. And pushed. The metal clasp snapped off and clanked to the ground. He listened to Jin continue to soothe the bison with her gentle petting and soft murmuring. He could barely hear the scratch of stone against metal as Shanyuan worked with his three manacles.

The second manacle broke and Li moved to his third. He was just about to break the last metal clasp when he stiffened. Something was coming. He could feel the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stand on end, but not like the presence of the Kuchisake-onna did. More like how-

:Reckless boy!:

His eyes opened in joyful shock just in time to receive a face full of fur that knocked him back to ground hard enough to force the air from him. Instinctively, his arms wrapped around the small Spirit currently whining and warbling and licking his face and anything she could get at with her sandpaper tongue and nuzzling him with her soft, furry snout.

“Zenko!” he cheered, almost immediately spitting out fur.

“Knowledge Seeker!” the Dai Li cried. “How- Where-”

She was back. She came back! That one thought kept a constant loop in his head. When Li
banished her, he’d only wanted to protect her. But he hadn’t been sure if she would return to him. The silence in his head, the knowledge that Zenko was far away from him… It had hurt.

:Never do that again!: Zenko commanded, her voice loud and strong and there in his head. Where it belonged. She leaned back and stared down at him with her unnatural blue eyes. :Swear it:"

“I…”

He couldn’t promise he’d never banish her again. If it meant keeping her safe, he would absolutely do it again. Without a second thought. He loved her. He would never forgive himself if something happened to her.

Four fluffy tails smacked him in the face and he laughed wetly, clinging to the fox Spirit who’d taken up residence in his heart. He had Agni’s lingering warmth on his skin and Zenko’s fur brushing against his scar and- He snorted, a wry smile working its way onto his face despite the awful situation. She still smelled.

“Ack!”

Zenko snorted in his face, batted him in the face lightly with a paw, and hopped off of him, swishing her tails in disdainful disappointment.

“You bit me!” Li cried, rolling to his stomach and staring at the kitsune in pained shock. One hand clapped over his unscarred ear where sharp, foxy teeth at bitten him. If he’d wanted a hole in his ear he would have gotten it pierced, thank you very much.

Li huffed a wry laugh. This wasn’t supposed to happen. He didn’t know what to do anymore. Except get out. They had to get out. Jin was right. They had to get out. They had to find a way.

“Um,” Jin said, just loud enough to be heard, “are you a Spirit?”

:I am indeed, brave girl,: Zenko said, butting her head against the girl’s arm. When Li sat up on his own, she hopped up to her rightful place on his shoulders. :It would seem,: she smacked Li’s face with her tails, :I can’t leave this boy alone without him finding trouble:.

“How did you get in here?” Shanyuan demanded, breaking Li out of his racing thoughts. “How did you even know we were here? This entire place should be warded against Spirits.”

:Li is bound to Wan Shi Tong,: Li heard Zenko say. :I can find him no matter where he may wander,: She tilted her head up to the Dai Li, her unearthly blue eyes glowing in the dimness of the cave. :As for the wards, there were none over this cell,: She flicked her ears. :A weakness your fellows should remedy perhaps?:

Shanyuan blinked, his mouth falling open as he looked straight up through the stone tunnel to the sky far above. When he looked back down, he wore an expression that was an amusing mesh of embarrassment and disbelief.

“This is insane,” the young Dai Li muttered. "First that Kuchisake-onna and now you and-"

:Kuchisake-onna?: Zenko demanded. :She's here? Now?:

Li groaned. “You have no idea,” he mumbled under his breath. He felt Zenko attention snap back to him with startling intensity. He mentally shrank away from her and avoided her eyes. “I... may have... made a deal with her.” He shuddered at the memory, pulling warmth from the sunlight and sun heated earth into his body to warm his core and ease his shaking.
“You what?!” Shanyuan cried. Jin said nothing but her grip on the bison’s fur tightened and the color she’d gained quickly drained from her face.

He heard Zenko growl by his ear and felt her fury snap in his head like sparks from a blacksmith’s forge. Why?: she demanded furiously.

“I had to,” Li said, spitting out the words. “She would have killed them if I hadn’t accepted her deal.”

That is not my concern.: Zenko snarled.

“It is mine, though!” Li snapped. “She won’t kill me. She wants revenge and for some reason she’s latched onto me. If I can help her get it, then maybe we can stop her from killing anyone else. At the very least, she won’t kill anyone here.” When Zenko continued growling, Li rolled his eyes and groaned. "Look, we can deal with this mess later. Right now we needed to get out of here. Shanyuan, this was your idea,” Li said, looking at the Dai Li and pointing to the bison. “You get on first.”

“What?!” Shanyuan squawked.

Zenko snorted from Li’s shoulder. The Dai Li looked up at the bison with wide eyes and pale face. Gulped. Then grabbed handfuls of thick fur and hauled himself up onto the bison’s head. He turned and held out a hand to help Jin climb up after him. Li gave the girl a quick boost and waited for her to climb up onto the bison’s back before clapping Shanyuan’s offered hand and climbing up himself.

“If I throw up,” Shanyuan said, looking Li dead in the eye, “I’m aiming at you.”

“This was your idea,” Li groused.

“Yeah,” the apprentice said, looking away nervously, “but I’m starting to think this was a mistake.”

“Why?” Li cried. “You said this thing can fly, right? We can get out of here.”

“I know! But-”

“I’m sorry to ask,” Jin said gently, cutting off the boys’ budding argument, “but could you please fly us out of here?” She leaned down so she practically lay on the creature’s back and scratched the fur. “We’d be ever so grateful.”

Such manners,: Zenko trilled, hopping off Li’s shoulders to snuggle up to Jin’s smiling face.

As if in agreement, the bison let out a loud bellow, crouched, slapped the ground with its tail, and leapt into the air.

And stayed there!

Li and Shanyuan were thrown back against the bison’s shoulders at the abrupt motion. As the creature angled itself upwards, they slipped over the fur towards the bison’s back. Shanyuan flailed out and caught thick fur in both of his rock gloved hands. Li managed to grab one handful before he started slipping. Sharp teeth struck out and clamped down on his Earth Kingdom green sleeve.

“Thanks Zenko,” he breathed, kicking his legs so he hung parallel on the bison’s back with Jin and Shanyuan.
Clinging to the bison’s fur, he stared ahead and watched as they gained speed and altitude. The stone walls of the tunnel sped past and the stone grate covering the top of the tunnel loomed. On Jin’s other side, Shanyuan grit his teeth and released one of his death grips on the bison’s fur and swept his hand sharply to the side. The grate slid aside seconds before they burst out into open air.

Jin cheered as fresh air rushed past her face. Both of her hands gripped the bison’s thick fur but her face glowed in the late afternoon sunlight. Her excitement and joy was contagious. Zenko opened her mouth and yowled. Li felt a smile of his own tug at his lips as he listened to Jin’s joyful laughter and felt Zenko’s exhilaration in his mind.

The sun. Arching his back, Li tilted his head back so the setting sun could shine on his face. It felt amazing and so free! They were out of there. They were out! They were free!

He turned to Shanyuan and bit back a snort. The Dai Li looked utterly terrified. He had a death grip on the bison’s fur and his dark brown eyes were wide and staring straight ahead. Every muscle in the apprentice’s body was tense with fear. It was hilarious, but Li knew better than to laugh.

“Shanyuan!” he called over Jin’s laughter. The Dai Li’s eyes darted to him quickly before locking on the view ahead again. “Are you alright?”

Shanyuan gulped, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he shook his head frantically. Li couldn’t understand how Shanyuan wasn’t happy. They were out of that underground prison, away from the Kuchisake-onna, flying through the sky, bathing in sunlight, free and-

Oh. Earthbender. Air was Earth’s opposing element. No wonder the apprentice was struggling to stay calm. Well, that and the small fact that they all had absolutely no idea how to steer the bison now that they were in the air.

Hmm. Well, yes, Li supposed that was a good reason to worry.

He leaned over to look at the ground and woah. That was a long, long way down. Maybe it was best if Shanyuan didn’t, um, oh, he already did. And he looked like he was going to be sick and-

“Shanyuan,” Li shouted over the rushing air. “Don’t you dare throw up on me or I will end you.”

Jin blinked at Li in confusion. Then she blanched and whirled to Shanyuan on her other side. “Throw up over the side!” she cried frantically. “Throw up over the side!”

Shanyuan gasped once before leaning over and emptying his stomach over the right side of the bison. Li winced sympathetically for any unfortunate person who happened to be under that ‘rainfall.’

:Gross:;

Li snickered.
Chapter Summary

In which Smellerbee is *not okay*, Li meets a flying human, Shanyuan is *still* not enthused, and Toph decides to take a chance.

Chapter Notes

*A/N:* As requested, the Appa licks~

When Smellerbee looked up at the sky, she expected to see a passing cloud. The brief shadow that had passed overhead may have been small but it was cool in this warm, humid afternoon sun. She had been secretly hoping for an afternoon shower to chase away the constant flow of people into the new zoo. With all the excited children and their curious parents wandering around, Smellerbee and Longshot and Zookeeper Kenji were having trouble acquainting themselves with the new zoo’s layout.

Longshot was working on drawing out a rough map of the zoo by hand while Kenji and the Avatar kept the visitors busy. Secretly, Smellerbee wondered why Aang didn’t just stamp his foot or whatever and earthbend a map of the zoo for them instead. He’d been the one to make this place, after all.

The shadow passed overhead and she squinted into the late afternoon sunlight. That was an odd looking cloud. ...wait a second. Something dripped onto her cheek. What?

The next instant, glops of *ickgrosdisgustingwhatthe* splattered all over her. She instinctively squeezed her eyes shut, slammed her mouth shut, and looked down to protect her face as best she could. Goose-pig-bumps of disgust covered her skin and shivers of *donothrowup* zinged up and down her spine.

Someone screamed. It wasn’t her. She wasn’t breathing. She could feel the steaming ick that covered her and had *no* desire to smell that. But she also didn’t want to die so…

Lifting the arm that wasn’t completely covered in gross ick, she carefully wiped her face so the warm… stuff wasn’t covering her nose and mouth. Then she took a quick, experimental breath and instantly regretted it.

That- That thing had *thrown up* on her!

Dropping her armful of fresh hay, she took another quick breath, did *not* throw up from the smell, and deliberately walked towards the nearest animal pen. She climbed over the wall, slid down the curved stone to the ground below, and walked straight for the watering hole. Without waiting to think this through, she hopped into the water and submerged herself completely.

Only when she finally broke the surface, did she take a full, deep breath. She still reeked but at
least she could wash herself off a bit. She scrubbed at her hair and face and arms every time she submerged herself.

The sunlight faded briefly once more and she warily looked up. Aang? Why was he- She got a good, clear look at the thing she’d thought was a cloud but had vomited on her and-

She spat. Appa. Damn it. The Avatar’s bison had *thrown up* on her! That- That-! Fuming, she screamed in disgust and fury!

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“Appa!”

What? Li twisted his neck to look behind him where the impossible voice had come from and was stunned when he saw an actual *person* soaring in the air behind them. Bright orange canvas and wood spun around and suddenly the person was *catching up* to them. How?!

“Appa!” the person cried, his voice carrying easily over the roaring wind.

Li blinked. He wasn’t the only one looking at the impossible person now. Jin, Shanyuan, and even Zenko were looking over Li’s back at the person in shock. The flying boy finally noticed the three of them riding on the bison’s bare back and almost fell from the sky in surprise.

Li tightened his grip on the back of Shanyuan’s tunic where he and Jin were still holding on to prevent the apprentice Dai Li from falling when he’d leaned over to throw up. With his other hand, Li reached out and caught the tip of the orange canvas glider wing and held on. Gray eyes stared up at Li stunned and fearful. Agni, the boy was *young*!

“Hang on!” Li shouted over the wind. “Don’t let go.”

Wide, gray eyes blinked and the kid nodded. ...was that an arrow tattoo on the boy’s *bald* head? Wha?! Who tattooed their head like that? Wouldn’t that hurt?

Whatever. Li grimaced and held onto the wooden contraption the boy had been flying with as tightly as he could. But his grip was slipping.

Gritting his teeth, he called, “Bounce!”

“What?” the tattooed boy cried, eyes wide in confusion.

“Bounce!” Li cried again. “My grip’s slipping!”

The boy shook his head. “What does that have to do with bouncing?” he asked.

What was *wrong* with this kid- *No!*

Wood slipped from his fingers and he watched in horror as the tattooed boy fell, then stopped as the canvas wings leveled out. The boy glided back up to Li’s eye level and looked right at him, and flashed him a carefree smile.

Li blinked and his mouth dropped open. Still there. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. *Nope. Still there.*

Okay. Maybe he was going crazy.
He couldn’t do anything but stare as the boy swooped in a lazy arc overhead before overtaking them entirely and diving down in front of the bison’s head. The bison bellowed and dove down after the kid leaving Li’s stomach behind. Shanyuan made a high pitched sound that Li couldn’t fault him for but Jin squealed and laughed in delight. Had she been strapped in, Li wouldn’t have been surprised to see her hold her arms in the air, hands open wide to feel the breeze.

Tucked safely between Li and Jin’s bodies, Zenko yowled. Li felt all of their bodies sliding back right before Zenko dug her sharp teeth into his sleeve. As he watched, they rapidly lost altitude and plunged towards the Agrarian Ring’s farmland far below. They swerved and suddenly, it wasn’t ground anymore but water?! No! They’d just escaped from an underground-underwater base. Li didn’t want to go back under waterrRRRRR??!!??! Oh-kay, swooping back up now and banking sharply to the left and wooh he was getting a little whoozy and cotton mouthed.

:Don’t even think about it!: Zenko commanded in his foggy mind. :Breathe!:

Oh. Right. Good idea. In, hold, out. Jin was screaming more than laughing now. In, hold, out. Shanyuan was definitely screaming. In, hold, out. They were slowing down now. Were those buildings? In, hold, out. Nope. Just weird rock formation things. ...woah. Yeah. Dives and climbs he could take. But sharp turns? He could feel his eyes beginning to roll back in his head again.

:Li!:

Blink. Gasp. In, hol- Nope. Shit! Out! In! Hold! Damnit! Too close! Too close! Too close! Out! In, hol- “Uff!”

They landed hard and Li was dizzy and woozy and just slid down the furry side of the bison. He didn’t fall all the way though because someone was clinging to his arm and teeth were still gripping his sleeve. Probably tearing the fabric too. Ying would lecture him for that. Oh. Fuzzy. Woah.

In, hold, out.

He kicked out with his feet and touched the ground. Only then did the hand and teeth holding him aloft let go. His legs wobbled as he stood on solid ground. Woah. That. Was. Amazing. He would definitely do that again.

In, hold, out.

But preferably with a saddle or something next time. Riding bareback? ...not exactly safe.

Gray eyes. Right in his face. So close. What the-?!

He instinctively flinched and pushed the gray eyes away from his face hard. Unfortunately, he staggered from the force of his push and fell back against soft fur, which wasn’t too bad really. Feet moved in his peripheral vision and he turned his head to watch Jin slide gleefully down next to him. But instead of catching herself, she just let herself slide all the way down so she was half lying on the ground, half leaning against the bison’s side.

Paws landed on his shoulder and he could feel foxy amusement at his loopy state. Flushing, he glared at Zenko who just laughed at him with her unique, foxy laughter. Ugh. He’d never live this down. So he got loopy on adrenaline and falling from the sky. That didn’t happen to most people okay? It was crazy and awesome and wild and scary and free and-
“Hoo-ugh!”

...Oh. Shanyuan.

Pushing himself off of the bison, Li staggered his way around the front of the bison, skidding to a stop when the boy with gray eyes and bald, tattooed head appeared in front of him again.

“Wait!” the boy cried, holding up both hands, one hand still holding his glider thing. “Why are you-”

“Not now!” he said, pushing the boy aside.

He found Shanyuan on his hands and knees dry heaving and shuddering. Li raced to the apprentice Dai Li and grabbed his shoulders, scooping the long, black braid up so it stayed out of range of vomit. Reaching around Shanyuan’s neck with the utmost care not to alarm the already shaken Dai Li, he unclipped the distinctive black and green hat and set it aside.

Shanyuan shuddered and dry heaved again. Li winced sympathetically. It hadn’t occurred to him how against flying Shanyuan would be. It should have, but it hadn’t. Shanyuan had been the one to suggest the idea of potentially flying out of the Dai Li base so he hadn’t considered that flying was bad for the earthbender. Apparently, it was very bad.

“Shanyuan!”

Jin joined Li by the apprentice’s side, rubbing the struggling boy’s back soothingly.

:He’s recovering,: Zenko said. Li turned his head to the fox Spirit sitting next to Li, her tails curved around his legs. :Earth and air are opposites. He wasn’t ready for the loss of all contact with his element so suddenly and his body is suffering for it.:  

“Will he be alright?” Li asked worriedly.

Zenko nodded. :He will be,: she said, nudging him with her wet nose. :Just make sure next time he goes up in the air, his chi has the chance to adjust and recover upon landing.:  

“Li?”

He met Jin’s eyes and offered a small smile. “Zenko says he’ll be fine,” he said. “His chi’s just all messed up. He needs to ground himself.”

She hesitated, then her eyes widened and her mouth formed a small ‘o’ in understanding. “He’s a bender,” she murmured. Her soft brown eyes dropped back to Shanyuan’s back, rubbing it gently. “I didn’t know it could affect someone like this. It didn’t affect you as badly.”

Li shrugged and flushed. “I’m Fire,” he said, trying to say it without fear. “Air isn’t my opposing element.”

“But it is for Earth,” Jin said, wincing sympathetically.

“Um, is he going to be okay?”

Li turned to the new voice and saw the boy there. Oddly, the boy looked… afraid of them. Weird.

“He will be,” Li replied. “Look, we need to get back to the Lower Ring. We have news for the Dai Li. They need to know what’s happened.”

Zenko made a warbling sound before looking around Li’s head. The boy’s gray eyes bulged when he actually looked at the fox Spirit. Li, however, paid the stranger close attention. He was disturbed by the low growl vibrating Zenko’s throat right by his ear. She didn’t like this boy. Why?

“Okay, do you know whose bison this is?” he asked, focusing his attention on the boy and not the unnerving growl.

Aang nodded, patting the bison’s fur and grinning proudly. “Yup,” he chirped. “He’s mine. His name’s Appa.” The bison groaned and turned its massive head so it could nuzzle the boy playfully.

“That’s nice,” Li said quickly. “Listen, my friend needs to warn his Master of-” Wait. The bison belonged to- “You’re the Avatar,” he said in awe.

Oh. Tui’s snow-white toes, no wonder Zenko was growling. The Avatar stole from Wan Shi Tong. He grimaced. This made things a bit difficult. They could still use the bison’s flying ability.

Aang’s smile shrank to more of a grimace than a grin but stayed in place. “Y-yeah,” he said nervously. “I am.”

“Please,” Jin said, speaking up without fear, “can you give him a ride back to the Lower Ring?”

“Yu Huang’s balls!” Shanyuan exclaimed, sitting up and glaring up at them. “You’re both insane if you think I’m going to get on the thing again.”

Li balked. “But you need to tell Tengfei about the-”

“How ‘bout the train station then?” Jin offered peacefully. Shanyuan turned to her with hope in his watery eyes. “Would that be better?”

Shanyuan swallowed and nodded.

“How can you take us to the nearest train station, please?” Jin asked Aang.

“And for my stomach’s sake,” Shanyuan groaned, reaching for his discarded hat, “please stay near the ground.”

Aang blinked, dumbfounded. “Uhhh… Oh-kay,” Gray eyes blinked then stared at Li for a long moment. “Do you- Um, well, do you know me?”

Li sat up straighter, hope blossoming in his chest. “Why?” he demanded urgently. “Do you know me? Have we met somewhere before?”

Aang hesitated, looking worried. “I- I’m not sure,” he said eventually. “What’s your name?”

Oh. Li’s hope flickered and dimmed causing his shoulders to droop. “I’m called Li,” he said. Without waiting for a response he knew would disappoint him, he got to his feet. “Come on. We need to hurry. She won’t wait forever.”

“That waterbender had better not still be there,” Jin growled under her breath. “Or I’ll give her a good piece of my mind.”

...Li made a mental note to not get on Jin’s bad side. Ever.
Between himself and Jin, they got Shanyuan to his feet. The apprentice Dai Li did not look very good, but he certainly looked less pale and more steady now that he’d had his feet on solid earth for a while. Shanyuan shook his head, blinked twice, then stiffened. Next to him, Jin’s mouth parted in surprise as they both stared at something over Li’s shoulder.

“Um… Li?” Jin said. “You’re, um-”

A low groan and gust of hot air froze Li in place. That had come from right by his ear. Oh… Oh no. Oh Agni no. The bison had been facing the other way next to Aang. When did- Gulping, Li slowly turned and saw teeth each easily the size of his fist. He may have helped free the creature, maybe even liked it, a little, but that didn’t mean he wanted to be this close to its mouth.

The enormous mouth opened and Zenko hopped off his shoulders. That should have been his warning. That tongue was huge and probably weighed a ton and what was it doing what-

It licked him?!

Sticky and stinky and animal breath and wet and- He squeezed his eyes shut and shuddered as wet, warm saliva dripped down his face and body. Ugh! That. Was. Disgusting!

:Now who smells bad?:

Li opened his eyes and looked right at Zenko who was sitting with her tails wrapped daintily around her feet and grinning her remorseless foxy grin. She was definitely responsible for this. Li didn’t know how. But she was. He just knew it. Zenko snorted and tilted her head in coy innocence. Li didn’t buy it for a second. Sneaky fox.

“Ugh,” Shanyuan groaned.

“Mm. I,” Jin said in slow, halting words, “am going to take a bath.” She took a deep breath. “As soon as I get home. Yes.”

Li glanced at his friends and felt his mouth quirk up in sympathy. It seemed he hadn’t been the only one to experience the bison’s, um, show of affection.

“He likes you,” Aang murmured wonderingly.

Shanyuan groaned. “Thanks,” he said curtly. “But I did not need to know that. In fact, I was quite happy not knowing that.”

Zenko’s gekkering laughter followed them as they all reluctantly piled back onto the bison’s back. Shanyuan stopped to pick up a moss covered rock to hold onto before climbing up himself. Zenko just hopped and landed primly on the bison’s back as if it was the easiest thing she’d ever done. Li rolled his eyes and received a playful bat from one of her tails. Aang spun his hands around the moment he leapt and floated up onto the bison’s head.

“How are you doing that?” Li asked, leaning over the furry body to see Aang’s bald, tattooed head.

Once again, gray eyes looked up at him with an emotion Li couldn’t place. “I’m an airbender,” Aang said, frowning slightly. “I can make the air move around me so I can fly.” He shrugged. “Well, sort of anyway.”

Li bit his lip. “Do you know me?” he asked hesitantly, hoping… Hoping. “Have we met before?” Aang’s smile eased to something more friendly. “Yeah, we have,” he said. “You saved my life.
“Appa! Yip yip!”

Li gaped. *Him? He* had saved the *Avatar’s* life? What? “How did- woah!”

“Yu Huang have mercy,” Shanyuan groaned, burying his face in the mossy rock he clutched for dear life.

Jet was positively *fuming*. Toph could feel his heartbeat through the ground from across the room. She could feel every scuff of Jet’s boots and the rock gloves binding his hands behind him. She was kind of impressed at Jet’s tenacity. Bound and under watch for hours and he *still* hadn’t stopped trying to get free. She almost felt sorry for him.

Which was why she found herself standing in front of him. Jet was probably glaring at her but she didn’t pay him any attention. She could feel the stone floor surrounding the wooden support post rising between Jet’s back and his rock-bound hands. She couldn’t bend wood and bending the floor would be dumb. But bending those rock gloves that she could feel when they touched the stone floor like *now-*

Crumbled rock and dust fell to the floor and Jet stiffened. Toph crossed her arms and gave Jet her best blind glare. “Look,” she said fiercely, “I know what Sweetness said and I want you to know, she wasn’t lying.” Jet’s pulse jumped but she cut him off before he could speak. “But I *also* know Li wasn’t lying either.” Jet stilled and his pulse slowly slightly. “I want to know how both Sweetness and Short Fuse could be telling the truth at the same time.”

Jet’s pulse skipped but he didn’t move or speak.

“I could just bend those rock gloves back over your hands, you know,” she said sternly. “But I’d rather you just explain.”

“I can’t,” Jet said sounding grim. “I promised him I wouldn’t tell.”

Okay, Toph could understand that. “Then is there anything you *can* tell me?” she pressed. “Katara said Li’s a firebender. Is that true?” she added, keeping her voice low to not attract the wrong attention. She could feel everyone in the medical clinic, but she wasn’t beyond the idea of someone sneaking up on her. Twinkletoes was her friend after all and he could *fly*.

Jet’s pulse spiked, then slowed and his body shifted.

“He is,” Toph murmured, her blind eyes wide. “Why is he in Ba Sing Se?”

“He came here with his family,” Jet said reluctantly. “He hasn’t done anything wrong. Hell, you should see him with kids. He’s useless, but they still adore him. Wear him out, too.” He chuckled softly. “He just wants to live, Toph,” he said seriously. “He’s a firebender, yeah. But he’s a good guy and I like him.”

He fell silent, but Toph could feel his pulse pick up slightly.

“But you already knew that,” Jet said, a smirk audible in his voice. “That’s why you did this.” His body jerked and a finger tapped the floor where the remains of the rock gloves lay.

“Katara says his name’s Zuko,” Toph said.
“I don’t care what name he had,” Jet growled. “His name’s L-”

“I wasn’t done,” Toph said sharply. “She also says he’s the prince of the Fire Nation.” And, yeah, that definitely made Jet’s pulse race. “You really didn’t know,” she whispered.

She could hear Jet’s breathing pick up. “You’re lying,” he whispered.

“I’m not,” she said.

“You have to be,” Jet snapped, the fear in his voice reflected by his racing subtly vibrating the stone floor. “He’s not- He couldn’t- He’s a waiter!”

“I’m not lying,” Toph said firmly. “And neither was Sweetness. And neither was Li.” Which did not make sense. “He meant it when he said he had no idea what Sweetness was talking about. He really did.”

She sighed and felt the ground for Katara’s distinctive shifting where she sat on the far side of the room by Master Ye Xiu working on the sick people here. She trusted Katara. But she also trusted her bending. Li really had no idea what Katara had been talking about. He’d been scared but he hadn’t attacked. Katara had.

Toph remembered feeling the fear zing through Li’s feet as his bounced up to the balls of his feet and pushed Jin out of the way of Katara’s frozen waterfall. Then again after the ice vanished and that creepy Spirit lady appeared, Li had done something to Zenko. The fox had literally vanished from Toph’s seismic sense completely. The moment she was gone, Li’s pulse had slowed to that of an unconscious person.

Not once had Li tried to attack. He had only reacted in defense. Toph knew that. So she trusted in that.

“I’m going to get Li out,” Jet said in a voice that made it clear he wouldn’t let anything stop him.

Toph nodded and listened. “If you go out the back, Katara won’t see you,” she said. “Roulan probably will, but I doubt she’ll stop you.”

“She won’t.” Jet shifted so he got his feet under him and got into a crouch. His weight moved to one foot before pausing. “Hey Toph,” he said softly. “Thanks.”

Toph waited, listening to Jet slip out of the clinic, before cracking her knuckles and waiting for that Dai Li Tengfei to come back in. This should be interesting.
**Ground Truth**

Chapter Summary

In which Tengfei gets an unpleasant dose of the unexpected, in more ways than one, and Jet makes an alliance.

Chapter Notes

**A/N:** And things begin to come together. This chapter also fought me. Not sure why. The beginning and end were easy. The middle was a pain.

Tengfei had been around. He’d seen things, smelled things, said things, done things most people would never dream of. He wasn’t proud of it all, but that hadn’t stopped him. He swore to protect his people, his city, and protect them he would. From the Human crimes to the Spiritual crimes, he cleaned up messes like this on a regular basis.

But he had to admit, looking up at the sky and seeing his Apprentice swing down from the Avatar’s bison with his iron chains had never been something Tengfei had ever imagined himself seeing. Shanyuan landed gracefully, rolling to break the force of his fall just like he’d been trained. Then he promptly stayed right where he was on all fours, shuddering violently and huffing raggedly.

Tengfei stopped what he was doing and rushed to his Apprentice’s side.

“Shanyuan!” he cried, grasping his apprentice’s shaking shoulders. “Sweet Yu Huang’s mercy, what the hell happened to you?”

Tengfei got his apprentice to sit up, grasping the shaking shoulders and forcing the young man to look at him. Shanyuan blinked wide brown eyes which immediately focused when they saw him. The young agent grabbed Tengfei’s arms and coughed.

“Kuchisake-onna.”

“What?” Tengfei said. No. No, there was no way.

“Kuchisake-onna!” Shanyuan repeated fiercely, his eyes gleaming with a fanatic glow. “She’s under Lake Laogai. She’s there!”

Tengfei felt the sturdy ground crumble beneath him. “No. Damn it, no!” he gasped, lifting his gaze to stare in the direction of the Dai Li headquarters. His comrades. Long Feng. And Shanyuan was muttering like a madman. “What? What! Shanyuan, you need to talk to me. Speak clearly!”

“Fuck it, Li made a deal with the Kuchisake-onna!” Shanyuan shouted, pronouncing every word clearly and concisely. Fury and fear dripped from his voice. “That utter, imbecilic, suicidal, maniac!”
“Shanyuan,” Tengfei said sternly, jolting his shaken apprentice out of his spiraling fury, “the Kuchisake-onna. Where is she now? Do you know?”

The young man shook his head and pointed at the Avatar’s bison which was still soaring through the air over Ba Sing Se towards the Middle Ring. But even as Tengfei watched, the beast swerved sharply to the left and two small forms dropped from its back. They landed on the roof of a building near the train station. One wobbled precariously before the other caught them and held them steady.

“They’re going to—” Shanyuan gasped, staggering to his feet. “I need to help them. Shit, first,” he tightened his grip Tengfei’s arms, “you need to send agents to Lake Laogai. Medics. They need—” He blanched and breathed. “The Spirit, she… She slashed a Joo Dee. She was attacking Long Feng.”

Damnit!

“Li stopped her,” Shanyuan continued. “She wants him. I don’t know why, but, Spirits, she wants Li. He made a deal to save our lives. He’s going to help her get her revenge. I don’t know how but—”

“Alright. Alright. Calm down, Shanyuan. Calm down!” Tengfei commanded in a stern voice. “The other agents are already on their way to Lake Laogai,” he said, making sure he had his apprentice’s complete attention. “The Avatar’s earthbending teacher heard everything. She told me the Spirit was a Kuchisake-onna. I passed that on to Agent Aiguo. He’s leading the Dai Li back there. They’ll make sure Long Feng is safe.”

Shanyuan nodded, then blinked and stared at Tengfei in confusion. “But then,” he gulped and looked around, “why are you still here?”

Well, this was awkward. “I’m on lookout duty,” he grumbled. Shanyuan seemed to be calming down which was good, but Tengfei wasn’t taking any chances with his young apprentice. “Toph and Katara are still in the Autumn Leaf Clinic.” He grimaced and looked between the clinic and the contaminated well.

“Okay. But why lookout duty?” his partner asked.

“Because I screwed up and let Jet escape,” he grumbled. “You remember the boy with Li last night?”

Shanyuan made a face like he’d sucked a particularly sour lemon-lime. “The one who laughed at me, you mean,” he said glumly.

Despite the tense situation, Tengfei found the strength to smirk. “Yes, him. He came looking for Li,” his smile faded, “after we’d already arrested him. I had to hold him.” He tilted his head and shrugged. “He escaped.”

Sharp brown eyes, much calmer than they were moments before, regarded him shrewdly. “Escaped?”

Tengfei shrugged and began moving out of the closed plaza to the clinic. “Rock gloves and earthbenders don’t mix,” he said.

“But I thought Jet wasn’t a bender,” Shanyuan said, falling into step next to is master.
“I don’t remember saying he was,” Tengfei replied, pushing open the door.

“I can’t stay.”

Startled, Tengfei stopped and turned to his apprentice. “What do you mean?”

“I’m a Dai Li.” Why did it sound like Shanyuan was ashamed of that? “I ran from the Kuchisake-onna when she attacked Long Feng—”

“What you were right to do so,” Tengfei said firmly. “You’re an Apprentice Dai Li. You aren’t trained to face a Spirit of her caliber. No Dai Li should face a Spirit like her alone.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Shanyuan said, shaking his head and taking a step back. He glanced over his shoulder at the train station in the distance. “I ran then.” He gulped and looked back at his master. “I’m not running now.”

“Shanyuan.” This was insane. “I am your Master. I wouldn’t dare face the Kuchisake-onna alone. Why else do you thing a whole contingent of Dai Li went back to Lake Laogai to—”

“Li’s going to face her.”

“What?” Impossible.

“He helped me get out of there, Master Tengfei,” Shanyuan said. He bowed. “I owe him.”

Tengfei barely had time to think before he was taking his stance and bending the earth beneath his apprentice’s running feet, willing it to soften and suck the boy in. He was not going to let his apprentice face that Spirit alone. Not even with Li there. Tengfei had a responsibility to his city, yes. But he also had a responsibility to Shanyuan.

With a startled cry, Shanyuan sank into the ground. He struggled fruitlessly for a moment, before lifting his free hands and forcing them back down, propelling himself up and out of his prison of earth. Spinning in the air, Shanyuan kicked a rock wall between himself and his master. Damn! Tengfei couldn’t reliably bend what he couldn’t see.

Forcing his own hands down towards the earth, Tengfei bent the rock wall back into the ground. Shanyuan wasn’t there. His pulse raced as he ran across the open plaza, studying the streets and the rooftops for any sign of his young partner. A flash of green and there!

Tengfei loosened the chains on his arms and tossed them up, waiting for the hooks at the end to latch onto the nearest rooftop. Crouching, he sank his chi into the earth beneath him, readying it to launch him into the air when he sank into the ground what?! Sun-warmed earth closed around his body up to his chest, covering his hands.

What?! How?! Shanyuan was too far away! He hadn’t even been looking at—

“What’s going on?”

Toph. He’d let his guard down. He muttered a curse. He was slipping.

“Let me go,” Tengfei ground out, glaring impotently at the blind earthbender.

“Not until you tell me what’s going on,” Toph said.

“Toph,” he said slowly, succinctly. “Either you let me go or you stop my apprentice. Right now.”
She looked straight at him with her milky blind eyes. “You’re scared,” she said simply. “Why?”

Before he had the chance to answer, a shadow fell over him accompanied by a low animal groan. Oh no. Oh Spirits, no. Please. Oh for- “Mmff!”

“Toph! Appa’s back! You won’t believe it!”

He. Couldn’t. Breathe.

“Appa?!” he heard Toph call, her voice muffled by the tons of fur pressing on his rock-bound face. “You actually found Appa! Katara! Aang found Appa!”

“What?” he heard the waterbender’s voice come from further away. “Aang! Appa!”

Tengfei jerked his head and was eternally grateful for his conical hat. He could breathe now, sort of, but he couldn’t see much beyond its rim thanks to the tons of fur on top of him. He could still see shadows on the ground, though. He watched the Avatar’s shadow bounce up, his feet actually lifting off the ground briefly.

“You won’t believe it,” Aang gushed. “I saw Zuko! He’s here in Ba Sing Se. But it’s weird. It’s like he didn’t even know me. He didn’t try to capture me once.”

So it was true. Li really was the Fire Prince. Wait. ...capture?

“We know,” Katara said, her shadow crossing her arms in frustration. “Don’t worry. I froze him and the Dai Li arrested him.”

“What?” the Avatar cried, air swirling around him. “Are you okay? He didn’t attack you, did he?”

“She’s fine,” the blind earthbender said, her shadow waving a hand dismissively. “Actually, I’m more worried about Li right now.”

...did they forget he was even here?

“Li?” Aang asked. “Huh. Yeah. Jet said Zuko was going by Li.”


They really did forget he was here. Or were they deliberately ignoring him?

“Uh, a few hours ago, actually,” Aang said, floating over to Katara’s side. “We just talked. He’s changed. A lot.”

Katara scoffed. “He’s playing you,” she said in annoyance. “He hasn’t changed one bit.”

“Says Jet’s ex,” Toph snarked.


...they were deliberately ignoring him.

Toph’s shadow shrugged. “We both know Li,” she said. “I’m Li’s friend and Jet’s dating him. Also, Li’s kitsune is awesome. Not as awesome as me, of course, but still awesome.” She clenched her fist. “She owes me another game of Mah Jong.”

Alright. This was getting ridiculous.
“If you two are going to ramble,” Tengfei snapped, his patience growing very thin, “then get your bison off me and let me out of here.”

The Avatar’s shadow jolted. “Huh? Who said- Oh! Sorry!”

Tengfei gulped in fresh air and spat out fur when the bison moved off of him. Then a childish face appeared in his field of vision. A blue arrow tattoo was visible on the boy’s bald head just above a pair of open gray eyes filled with honest concern. It really was the Avatar. This was not what he signed up for.

“Sorry,” the Avatar said. “I didn’t see you there.”

Tengfei glared. “Obviously.”

At least the boy had the decency to look abashed. Then he blinked and really looked at the Dai Li agent. “Wait,” he mumbled in confusion. “Why are you buried like that? Isn’t that uncomfortable? Oh, yeah! Did that Dai Li I dropped off find his Master? He said he had to get a message to him.”

“He got it to me,” Tengfei said, glaring darkly at Toph. “Now if your friend would be so kind as to let me out, I’d very much like to stop him from doing something insanely stupid.”

“Not happening,” Toph said, planting her fists on her hips. “What’s going on? And what does it have to do with Li?”

“His name is Zuko,” Katara said, giving Toph an odd look. “Why do you keep calling him ‘Li’?”

Toph was silent a moment, her unseeing gaze cast down in thought. “Because I’m beginning to think he’s not Zuko,” she said.

“But he is Zuko,” Aang insisted. “I saw him. We talked. He didn’t recognize me. He even asked if I knew him. It was almost like he couldn’t remember or something.”

“I don’t care if he remembers or not,” Katara said. “We’ve got Appa back. I say we go get Sokka then get out of this city.”

“I’m with Sweetness on this one,” Toph said.

“But we have to tell the Earth King about the invasion plans,” Aang argued. "That's the whole reason why we’re here."

“Do whatever you want!” Tengfei snapped, glaring viciously at the children in front of him. “My apprentice is about to get himself killed. Now you can let me out so I can try to stop him or you can rest assured you will never leave this city alive.”

The waterbender looked shocked by his outburst and the Avatar looked genuinely concerned. But Toph’s eyes were wider than before and staring at the ground near his buried chest. She wriggled her toes and the earth around him softened then tossed him out.

“You mean Shanyuan? But,” the Avatar hesitated, his gray eyes sparkling with worry, “I just left him here. He was fine. A little airsick maybe, but fine!”

“Before you brought him here, did he tell you anything else?” Tengfei demanded. “About what he was going to do? Where he was going? Anything?”

The Avatar flinched but tried to think. “Um, not really,” he said after a moment. “L- er, Zuko said
he was going to the Ba Sing Se University to meet someone and Shanyuan didn’t seem too happy about it. Neither did that girl, Jin, actually. Oh!” He whirled to his friends. “Zuko’s got a fox Spirit with him!”

“A Spirit is with Zuko?” Katara gasped, appalled.

“Old news,” Toph said. “Her name’s Zenko.”

“Yeah! And- Wait, what?” Aang gasped. “Zuko named the Spirit?!”

“Avatar!” Tengfei shouted, startling a flinch out of the children. “You said there was a Knowledge Seeker with Li. Was it with him when you saw him last?”

Gray eyes narrowed. “Why?” Aang said. “Li said the Dai Li were the ones who had Appa. Why should I tell you anything?”

Why indeed. It didn’t really matter anyway. Tengfei would get the answers he needed once he caught up to Shanyuan and Li. Tossing his chains so the hooks latched onto a rooftop, he hauled himself up and left. He’d deal with the potential fallout of this whole debacle later. What mattered right now was making sure Shanyuan lived and Li didn’t get himself or Jin maimed or killed.

The familiar weight of his hook swords hanging from his belt loops was surprisingly comforting. He didn’t feel naked and vulnerable now. He was armed and felt ready for anything. Just like old times. Almost.

He owed Toph for getting him out of the Dai Li’s grasp, but he wasn’t going to hop on paying her back any time soon if he could help it. He’d rather stay as far away from the Avatar’s gang as he could. Especially Katara. He was too furious at her. He wouldn’t be able to guarantee he wouldn’t attack her.

She had frozen his boyfriend for drawing water!

Control! Now was not the time or the place. Save that anger. Save it for when it would actually serve a purpose. Like saving his boyfriend from wherever the Dai Li took him. Which, come to think of it, he had no idea where that was. At all. He didn’t even have a remote idea of where to start looking.

So he climbed to the roof. The Dai Li weren’t the only ones who liked high places after… all… Was that the Avatar’s bison?! Why was it by the train station?

Something green moved in the corner of his eye and, sure enough, there was a Dai Li running and swinging from rooftop to rooftop towards the train station. Well, Jet had been wondering where to start looking. The Spirits seemed to grant him some luck hunting today.

He took two steps back, then ran as fast as he could down the wooden beam and jumped across the distance between this building and the next. This was nothing like swinging from tree branch to tree branch, and yet so similar as well. This was something he was good at.

He kept his hook swords in his belt as he ran. There was nothing for them to grab and use to swing with. He could tell the moment the lone Dai Li noticed him coming. The green robed agent took one look at him and ran faster.
Odd. What? No attempt to dodge or lose Jet? No attempt to stop him or capture him? Nothing?

Jet was offended. He was also closing in on the agent. The Dai Li were good and clearly trained for an urban hunting ground. Jet had grown up in the unpredictable environment of a forest. Trees were not stagnant. They moved with the wind, creaked, and weren’t always trustworthy supports. Roofs were solid, immovable, and, unless the owners were careless, very trustworthy. In short, the Dai Li were good. Jet was better.

He waited until the Dai Li agent tossed his chains out to aid in his next roof hop before drawing one of his hook sword. Spinning the weapon around so the hilt faced forward, he threw it as hard as he could. He grinned in satisfaction when the iron chain links tangled with his hook blade as the bladed hilt dug securely into the wall of a building.

The agent yanked but was unable to free his chain. So he turned and raised a rock gloved hand in Jet’s direction. But he didn’t fire. In fact, when the agent got a good look at Jet’s face, he lowered his hand and eased his stance.

“You’re with Li?” the agent called out.

“In more ways than one,” Jet drawled.

He slowed down, striding across the rooftop until he was within ten feet of the Dai Li. He glanced significantly at his sword, still tangled in chains and stuck in a wall, then back at the agent. Wait a second.

“You’re that agent from last night. Shan-something-er-other,” he said. “The one who thought Li was a waterbender.”

Ho-ho? Was that a blush?

“I get why you laughed,” the agent grumbled.

Well shit. Jet hefted his second sword threateningly.

“Li’s made a deal with the Kuchisake-onna,” the agent said.

“He did what?” Jet spat. Good thing he didn’t have a straw right now. He’d have missed it.

The agent frowned. “He’s going to meet with her right now,” he said. He tugged his chains again. “Look. You want Li safe, I want the Kuchisake-onna gone. Help me? And I’ll help you.”

Well, now that was a deal Jet could agree with.

“You got it.”
Jin led the way into the train station with Li trailing behind. She had only known Li for a little under a month, but she was glad she met him. He was incredibly awkward and prickly as a cactus, but he was honest.

It was so rare to find a guy who was honest these days. She knew if she asked Li for his opinion on something, he would give her his honest opinion with very little filter. If any filter at all. Li didn’t seem to understand the concept of mental filters. Which wasn’t entirely fair. Li tried. But he just… failed.

So when she heard him ask the Avatar -she’d actually met the Avatar! She couldn’t wait to tell her parents!- if they knew each other, she listened closely. This was juicy information. Not only had she met the Avatar and saved and ridden his bison, but she knew someone who had saved the Avatar’s life! How amazing was that?

Except Li had seemed genuinely surprised by that too. How was that possible? How do you not know you saved someone’s life?

On the other hand, how did she end up running from a crazy, murderous Spirit lady after seeing her friend frozen in ice and getting captured by the Dai Li? All in one day? She laughed wryly at herself. This was a real life Spirit tale. Her life was turning into a Spirit tale.

“The train won’t be here for another few minutes,” she said, checking the posted schedule.

She did a few quick calculations in her head and bit her lip in worry. The trains of Ba Sing Se were notorious for always being punctual. They didn’t wait for anyone. Ever. Not even the nobles from the Upper Ring got a free pass. If you were late, you missed the train. That was that.

Zenko brushed against Jin’s ankle and she crouched down to pet the Spirit. The fox’s eyes were closed now but she made a warbling sound that made it very clear she was enjoying the attention. Jin smiled then looked up at Li who was pacing and running his hands through his short black hair nervously.

“Li,” she said, keeping her voice low and gentle. “It’ll be okay. We made it out of there. The Avatar helped us get here. The Avatar! We can do this.”
Bright gold eyes moved to her and she smiled encouragingly. That was another thing about Li. His eyes held every emotion he felt plain for all to see. Like now. She could see the fear and determination in Li’s eyes and she could guess its causes. Aside from this Spirit tale she was currently living, there was another factor in this mess that she was studiously trying not to think too hard about.

Li was a firebender. Li was a firebender. She had been practically raised in Ba Sing Se, but she remembered the few years she’d spent beyond the Outer Wall. She remembered the Fire Nation, the war, the firebenders. She remembered and she was scared.

But she also knew Li. She had seen him firebend more than once now. Although the first time had scared her, those flames just appearing between Li and the Dai Li, she was far enough away to see that none of the flames had touched anyone. No one. Then again, when Li melted the door lock and the manacles off the Avatar’s bison, it had been subtle, quick, and efficient.

It was nothing like the grand, showy, and explosive style of firebending she remembered. Li’s style, for lack of a better word, seemed tailored to hiding. She doubted one of the firebenders she remembered could have hidden themselves and their firebending like Li could. Which led her to her latest realization.

She would bet her favorite hairpin that Li was ashamed of his bending. The one time Li had summoned a flame to try to melt the bison’s manacles, she’d seen the bison flinch away in fear. Li had seen it too. His entire form had wilted and he’d gone back to bending without any visible flame. But not before Jin had seen the hurt reflected in his eyes.

Jin wasn’t a bender and she was quite happy not being a bender. She’d seen the trouble benders often found themselves in, whether of their own making or not. Trouble like Li being attacked and arrested just because he could bend fire. Jin had been there. She’d seen everything. Li hadn’t done anything yet that waterbender had frozen him solid.

Just because he could bend fire.

It wasn’t fair.

“We made sure Shanyuan landed okay,” she said, standing and walking to Li’s side. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

Li grimaced but nodded. He held his hands down so Zenko could jump into them then hefted the fox’s tiny body so she could nestle comfortably in his arms. It was an adorable picture. Jin sighed.

“Alright, what’s bothering you?” she asked, crossing her arms and giving Li her best rendition of her mother’s ‘eye.’

Li flushed and looked away, down at the city below. “Nothing,” he mumbled.

“Mmhm.” Jin pursed her lips and pointedly glanced down at Zenko. “Do I need to ask her to get a straight answer or are you actually going to tell me the truth?”

Li whipped his head to her in genuine disbelief while Zenko made that sound that was distinctly like laughter.

“Don’t think I won’t,” Jin warned. “You’re my friend. Friends make sure friends are okay. I’m a professional gossip. If I see or hear something interesting, I weasel-ferret out the details.” She smiled. “If it’s a secret, you don’t have to tell me.” Even though she really wanted to know. “But I do need you to tell me if there’s anything I can do to help.”
Li blinked, the blush in his cheeks darkened. Jin sighed inwardly. If she didn’t know for sure that Li and Jet were together and happy that way, she would not have turned down the opportunity to date Li. She really did regret not meeting him before Jet. Maybe she would have had a chance. Maybe.

“It’s-”

“Say ‘nothing’ and I’ll ask Zenko,” Jin said, cutting off Li’s most likely pathetic excuse.

“Err.” Li hesitated awkwardly. “I just wanted to talk to the Avatar more, is all,” he mumbled, shifting his shoulders in an almost shrug.

Jin narrowed her eyes shrewdly. There was a lot in that simple statement. Jin didn’t know where to start. Well, when in doubt, start with the obvious.

“About how you saved the Avatar’s life, you mean?” Jin said. Li grumbled and Jin chuckled, mentally patting herself on the back. “You did seem surprised by that.” She saw the moment Li’s expression froze in fear. “Li, I just want to understand,” she said gently. “Please tell me.”

He gulped and hung his head, petting Zenko’s furry head. The fox made a soft warbling sound and swished one of her four tails. Li huffed and let his shoulders droop.

“It’s just embarrassing, is all,” Li said finally. “People can,” he shrugged, “treat me differently when they find out.”

Jin snorted and lifted both of her eyebrows. “Li,” she said. “I know you’re a,” she dropped her voice, “firebender.” Li tensed, eyes wide. “You’re still my friend. Honestly, I think the only way I’d really treat you differently about something is if you were Fire Lord Ozai or something crazy like that. Which, I mean,” she gestured to Li, “obviously isn’t true.”

Li’s lips quirked slightly. “How would you know?” he teased.

She tossed her hair, propped her hands on her hips, and squared her shoulders. “Unless you’re somehow over forty and still look my age, there is no way on Yu Huang’s green earth that you’re the Fire Lord.” She held up one finger. “But if, by some crazy miracle, you are over forty,” she eyed Li, holding her serious expression despite his snickers, “then I demand to know where you get off looking like that. Because that’s just not fair.”

He was definitely laughing now and Jin let herself smile too. Whatever it was that was bothering him couldn’t be that bad. Unless it was that Kuchisake-onna Spirit. Then it probably was that bad.

“I’m not that old,” Li said, a smile lingering on his face. “I know that for sure.” His smile faded. “It’s one of the few things I do know for sure.”

Here we go.

“Jin,” Li said slowly, his hands fidgeting with Zenko’s fur. “I don’t remember anything from before a month ago. Not really, anyway.” His gaze dropped back to the fox in his arms. “I’m not even sure if ‘Li’ is my real name or not. Ying and Than gave it to me. They found me when I woke up hurt and…” He shrugged. “They know I’m a firebender. So does Jet.”

She stood silently, processing what she was hearing and studying Li for any signs of deception. She found none. She wasn’t expecting any, but still… Well, she did admit she was living in a Spirit tale now. Why not throw this in too?
“Okay,” she said slowly. She chewed her lip worriedly. “Does Jet know about your…” She pointed to her head.

Li nodded. “He does, yes.”

Jin shifted her weight so it rested on one hip. “Okay.” She took a deep breath and let it all out, clearing her head. “Wow, this has been a long day.” She tapped a finger on her stomach as she mulled over this new information. “Alright. I won’t tell,” she said. “But after all this is over? You and me are going to get noodles and you’re going to tell me everything. Mm-kay?” Li looked dubious so she added, “Do this for me, and I’ll tell you the best way to get Jet in your bed.”

She couldn’t help it. She had never seen anyone turn so bright red before. She cackled like a madwoman while Li sputtered, desperately trying to recover any scrap of his dignity. Well, if Jin had ever doubted Li’s feelings for Jet before, she certainly didn’t now. Spirits, even Zenko was laughing with her.

“W-we’ve only known each other for a month!” Li cried. “Why would he want to do t-that already?”

“Why not?” Jin teased, smirking. “Don’t you want to?”

Li made a serious of incoherent sounds and clutched Zenko’s fur. The fox shook herself free of Li’s grip and hopped up onto his shoulders, draping herself there and gekkering. The blush in Li’s cheeks just got darker.

“You do,” Jin purred gleefully. “Oh you and I have a lot to talk about.”

“Mind if we join in?”

Li jumped at the unexpected voice and spun around. Jin took one look at the new arrival and cackled victoriously. She leaned forward and pushed Li into Jet’s waiting arms and quickly found her own arms full of fox Spirit. She scratched Zenko’s chin while she watched Jet catch Li’s flailing body easily.

She rolled her eyes, her smile fading when she noticed the other person with Jet. “Shanyuan.”

Jet looped his arms around his boyfriend’s waist and grinned in satisfaction. Li’s arms were pinned between their chests and his cheeks were practically glowing. Jet could feel Li’s warmth pressing against him and bounced one of his eyebrows up invitingly as he listened to his boyfriend struggle to formulate coherent words.

But he was merciful sort of guy, so he put Li out of his misery by putting those lips to better use. Li tilted his head automatically to accommodate the kiss and it did things to Jet’s ego. Li was still clumsy at kissing but he was getting better. Jet was a fabulous teacher, if he said so himself. Which he did. But then, Jet didn’t mind teaching Li. The rewards were quite satisfactory.

Just because he could, he thrust his tongue between Li’s lips startling a muffled squeak from his boyfriend. Chuckling against Li’s lips, he swept his tongue against the roof of Li’s mouth. The sound Li made was sinful and not something Jet ever wanted anyone else to hear. That was for him alone.

He pulled his tongue back into his own mouth and slowed the kiss until their lips parted. He leaned
back, digging his nails into his boyfriend’s lower back hungrily when Li instinctively leaned after him before catching himself. Li’s unsteady breathing and hooded gaze were testing Jet’s self control.

“If you two boys are done,” Jin drawled, her voice slicing through the mood like a knife, “the train’s here.”

And just like that Li looked like he was going to melt from embarrassment. It was adorable and Jet wanted to push Li against the nearest wall and kiss him stupid. But not here. However much he wanted to, they had more important things to do right now. Besides, he and Li had some things to… discuss.

With a herculean effort, Jet stepped away from Li, slipped his hand into one of Li’s, and tugged his ludicrously red boyfriend towards the train. The first bell rang and that jolted Li into moving faster. Jin and Shanyuan were already in the train when Jet and Li ran in after them to the tone of the third and final bell.

As the doors slid shut behind him and the train began to move, Jet looked around the train car. They were in the last car of the train with only a few other people. It was getting late in the day and most people would be coming back home from work. They should be, anyway. This was the furthest train station on this line from the Middle Ring. This car wasn’t empty, but Jet was fully aware of the fact that the few people in here already were studiously not looking at their little group of four. Five Jet corrected himself when he noticed Zenko still perched in Jin’s arms.

Shanyuan met Jet’s gaze and tilted his head down so his eyes were shadowed by the brim of his distinctive hat. The Dai Li’s dark brown eyes glanced at the other people in the train and Jet nodded. One look at Li and Jet knew his boyfriend had also noticed the not-so-subtle way everyone was not looking at them.

“Sorry,” Shanyuan muttered, tucking his hands into his sleeves. “Hazard of the uniform, unfortunately.”


The Dai Li winced and glared at her without any real heat. “You really think she’ll keep your deal, Li?” he asked, pitching his voice so only the four of them could hear.

“Deal?” Jet said, frowning suspiciously at his boyfriend. “What deal?”

Li glanced at him and reached up grasp at his neck, wincing when he realized there was nothing there. Jet had a pretty good idea what Li had been hoping to touch and felt his attention sharpen. Li only reached for Zenko’s tails like that when he needed to reassure himself of something.

“What did you do?” Jet asked, careful to keep his voice curious and not accusing.

“I…” Li did that breathing thing again, forced his shoulders to relax and tried again. “I made a deal with the Kuchisake-onna,” he said. What the shit?!” “She’s the Spirit from the ot-”

“I know who she is,” Jet said, staring at Li in horror. “You made a deal with that bitch?” he hissed angrily. “Why?”

“I had to,” Li said, his baby sparrowhawk eyes wide and honest. “She wants me for some reason. She would have killed everyone there to get to me if she had to.”
“What did you promise her?” Jet demanded.

Li huffed and crossed his arms, leaning back against the train wall in a very obvious sulk. “I promised I’d help her get her revenge if she promised not to kill anyone there and kept them busy long enough for us to escape.”

“Us?” Jet said, his hard earthen gaze locking on Shanyuan significantly.

The Dai Li bowed his head so his face was hidden fully by his hat. “I’m not fully trained yet,” Shanyuan whispered. “…I ran instead of staying and fighting.”

“You made the right decision,” Jin said, jabbing her elbow hard enough into Shanyuan’s ribs hard enough to make him flinch and cough. “There were Master Dai Li there and **they** were having trouble with her. You're one Apprentice. You had to warn your own Master.”

“I still ran,” Shanyuan said softly.

“Have you ever fought a Spirit like her before?” Jet said sternly.

Shanyuan glared at him from under his hat, then looked away. “No,” he grumbled. “I haven't been trained to yet. Master Tengfei told me the same thing.”

“He was smart.”

“Of course he is.”

“So why are you doubting him?” Jet watched as the young Dai Li struggled to form an answer to that statement. “Look,” Jet said, drawing Shanyuan’s attention, “you ran then. Fine. Whatever. Are you running now?”

“Like hell,” Shanyuan snarled, his brown eyes burning with defiance and anger.

Jet grinned. He liked that look. “Good,” he said, turning to Li expectantly. “So, what’s the plan?”

Li rolled his shoulders and sighed. “The Spirit originally showed up at the canal by the Ba Sing Se University,” he began. “We know she travels through the waterways.”

“That’s how she got into Lake Laogai,” Shanyuan said, nodding. “I’m still not sure how she got past our wards, though.”

“She burned through mine,” Li said, meeting the Dai Li’s gaze with his own. “The first spell I set up at the canal by the university, she burned through it and appeared. I had to banish her and set up the spell again while she and her influence were gone for it to hold.”

Shanyuan winced. “So she’s one of those Spirits,” he grumbled. Sighing heavily he rolled his eyes. “Right. I can set up and maintain wards and my iron chains can burn most Spirits. I have salt and spark rocks too. Otherwise, I have my earthbending.” He shook his head and shrugged. “That’s it.”

“I have my firebending, and the few spells and things I can remember,” Li said thoughtfully.

“Remember?” Shanyuan asked.

Li pressed his lips into a thin line and looked between Jet and Jin. So the girl knew. That made things a bit easier.

“I don’t remember anything from before a month ago,” Li said reluctantly, meeting Shanyuan’s
gaze. “I was attacked by a firebender and woke up in a ghost town. I don’t know who I was fighting or why, but I know they were trying to kill me.”

Shanyuan looked like he’d been kicked by an ostrich-horse. “How-” He shook his head. “How could you possibly not know who attacked you but know they were trying to kill you if you don’t remember anything?” he gasped, somehow keeping his voice low and glancing sharply at the people huddled on the other side of the train to be sure he wasn’t overheard.

Good point. Jet wanted to know that too. And since this was tied to the numerous other questions he needed answered, he kept his silence. However, when Li’s shy gaze slipped to his, he nudged his boyfriend’s shoulder in a friendly show of support. He still didn’t speak up, even though he could feel Zenko’s unseeing gaze on him, judging him.

Li breathed in, held it for three seconds, then breathed out and reached up for the frog knots of his collar. What was he doing? Was he stripping on the train? Not that Jet was complaining about the location. The audience, however, was a problem for… him…

Li pulled the flap of his long, brown tunic and the fabric of his long-sleeved, green undershirt and Jet felt his stomach plummet to his shoes. An angry red scar of puckered and semi-melted skin in the shape of a starburst bloomed just slightly to the right of Li’s sternum. It couldn’t be more than a month or so old at most.

Jet could only imagine how painful that must have been. He’d seen wounds like that before, on dead bodies. One powerful fireblast directly over the heart designed to kill in one blow. Yet Li had somehow survived it.

A soft gasp reminded him of Jin’s presence. He looked back at the other three conspirators of their group grimly. Zenko had dropped from Jin’s arms and trotted over to sit on Li’s foot and nuzzle his calf with her cheek. Jin was covering her mouth with her hands, her soft brown eyes glittering with pained horror. Shanyuan’s eyes were dark with emotion but his expression was of steely understanding.

Jet shifted his body so any curious eyes that happened to look over here wouldn’t see… that. His fingers dropped to his sword hilts, itching with a familiar burning fury. Deep breath, Jet. Wait. Something told him, he’d have the chance to vent some of that anger soon.

A faint flush colored Li’s cheeks as he quickly pulled the fabric back over the scar. After buttoning up his tunic, he tucked his hands into his sleeves. But instead of slouching self consciously, Li straightened his back and regarded Shanyuan evenly with his fiery gold eyes.

“How did you survive that?” Shanyuan breathed, his gaze dark and unforgiving.

Li shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted. He stayed still so Zenko could bound off the train wall to her usual spot on his shoulders, her tails curling protectively around his neck. “Probably because I knew a block of some kind at the time,” he continued. “Clearly it didn’t work completely.”

“You’re alive,” Jin said fiercely. “I’d say it worked just fine.”

Li reached up and grasped one of Zenko’s tails and nodded. “But because of that,” he said, “I forgot who I was. Ying and Than found me and gave me a name. They… adopted me.” A small, fragile smile touched his lips. “I could have just been a boy traveling with them. But they adopted me into their family.”
“They know you’re a firebender,” Shanyuan said, his tone even.

“They do,” Li replied. “They were the first people I told when I found out.”

“But I will find whoever did and I will make them suffer.”

“I didn’t do that,” Li said, his gaze burning with a cold, golden fire in his forbidding demeanor.

“Then the children in the kiln-”

“Fuck you,” Jet hissed.

“I’ve spoken to Wan Shi Tong and the professor,” Zenko said, her eerie blue gaze open and wise.

“We believe the children who died belonged to the Woman in White. When they were murdered, her fury and hate changed her to a Kuchisake-onna. As I understand it,” she glanced at Li, “a mother is a formidable enemy.”

“They are,” Jin said coldly. “You boys fight with fists. You beat each other to a pulp and that’s that. But girls...” She tsked and shook her head. A twisted smile darkening her pretty features. “We will ruin you. We’ll go after what you care about. We’ll rip it from you and make you watch. We’ll leave you with nothing but the desire to die and, if we’re feeling nice, we’ll give you death. If we aren’t,” she shrugged, “we’ll leave you in your ruin. There’s a reason why poison is considered a woman’s tool.”

Jet hadn’t meant to lean back. Pursing his lips, he glanced at his equally disturbed comrades and huffed. Man, he needed a straw to chew on. These people were crazy. He liked them.

“Damn it.”

He was too late. Tengfei glared furiously at the train racing away far down the rails from his crouch on the roof of the train station. He could bend his way after them, but that would draw attention and, he looked at the sky above the city, it seemed the Avatar was already doing that well enough on his own. Between the Kuchisake-onna and now the Avatar, the Dai Li would be spread thin. The Dai Li had a duty to this city. He had a duty to this city.

But as a Master Dai Li, he was also responsible for his Apprentice and partner. Shanyuan came first. The Dai Li could handle the Kuchisake-onna’s mess and, with Long Feng’s guidance, the Avatar’s mess as well. But no one would help Shanyuan. No one knew to look for him.

Good thing Tengfei knew where his apprentice was going. The final bell rang and stone grated against stone. He jumped onto the roof of the middle train car just as it passed under the overhang he crouched on. He landed perfectly, rolling over the stone to absorb the shock. He pressed himself against the roof, anchoring his chi to the stone so the wind couldn’t blow him off.

Tengfei would not let his apprentice die. Not alone at least. Not while he still drew breath.
Unexpected Stipulations

Chapter Summary

In which Shanyuan faces the reality of a Kuchisake-onna, Li begins to understand what a deal with a malevolent Spirit means, and they all learn that sometimes it's best to fight fire with Fire.

Chapter Notes

A/N: "So it begins." - Theoden, Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers

The canal was relatively quiet when they arrived. Unfortunately, or fortunately depending on how you looked at it, the few people who were there cleared out fairly quickly the moment they caught sight of his uniform. Shanyuan pressed his lips into a thin line and tried not to let it get to him. This instinctive fear the populace of Ba Sing Se had of the Dai Li was one of the few things about his chosen career path that irked him. He liked being respected, but not feared.

At least that fear served a purpose right now. The fewer people who were here when the Kuchisake-onna showed up, if she showed up at all, the better. He had no desire to see anyone not already tangled up in this Spirit mess get hurt. His job was to protect his city, not endanger it.

He clenched his fists before taking a deep, calming breath and forcing his fingers to loosen up and rest gently on the chains loops around his arms. He needed to be ready when the Spirit appeared. He needed to relax and be ready to move at a moment’s notice. If he was too tense, his muscles wouldn’t move as quickly or as smoothly. He needed to focus and-

“Ack! What the-?!”

“Re-lax,” Jin said, tucking her weaponized elbow back demurely by her side. “We got this.”

“You hit me,” Shanyuan said and no, it was not a whine. “Again. How can you just… do that?”

The girl gave him an odd look, her lips turned up at the corners despite the incredulity in her eyes. She snorted. “You may be a Dai Li but you can’t be that much older than me,” she said, keeping her voice low. “Besides, you’re decent and you’re helping us.”

Shanyuan grumbled, surreptitiously rubbing his now sore ribs. “I still need to breathe,” he muttered under his breath.

“Well, when she put it like that… “No,” he whispered, trying not to hunch his shoulders and failing. He glanced quickly at the girl next to him and felt an odd feeling settle in his stomach when he saw her grinning proudly. Girls were so weird.
“It’s gone.”

Snapping back to the present situation, Shanyuan looked up to where Li was crouch by the canal between the bridge and the willow tree. The firebender was inspecting the place where he’d burned a protective barrier into the stone last night. How in the world had Shanyuan let himself be tricked by Master Tengfei into believing that spellcasting had been flash paper? Shanyuan secretly knew he would never live that down.

“You said yourself it probably wouldn’t last for long without sunlight,” Shanyuan said with a shrug. “Besides, it’s probably for the best the barrier isn’t up. It’ll make it easier for the Kuchisake-onna to manifest without aid.”

“If she shows up here at all,” Jet grumbled, hovering protectively at Li’s back. “We can’t exactly trust her.”

“Spirits can’t lie,” Li said, getting to his feet.

The Knowledge Seeker perched on the flat, stone ledge of the bridge and yipped. Without even looking, Li reached out to scratch the fox Spirit’s dark fur earning him a pleased chirrup. Shanyuan shook his head at the scene. That fox really had Li wrapped around her little paw.

“They can bend the truth or leave out information,” Li continued, scratching under Zenko’s chin, “but they can’t outright lie.”

“They can communicate? They can lie,” Jet griped. “And anyway, you’ll forgive me if I’m not exactly chomping at the bit to trust a murderous Spirit monster.”

Shanyuan winced instinctively. He may agree with Jet’s assessment, but he also knew when it would be wise to keep his mouth shut. Like now.

“It doesn’t really matter,” Li said, leaning against the bridge with a weary sigh. “I made a deal. I’ll keep my end. She wants revenge. I’ll help her get it.” His pale gold eyes lifted to the western sky where the sun was beginning to set. “I would just prefer to take care of it while the sun is still up.”

Interesting. “It’s true then,” Shanyuan didn’t quite ask. He ignored the way everyone looked at him curiously. “That firebenders are stronger during daylight. It’s true.”

Li grimaced but nodded. “I can feel the sun in the sky,” he said, looking at the still golden disk. “I always know where it is, when sunset is, when dawn is…” He shrugged and rubbed the back of his neck, rolling his head as if to ease a pinched muscle. “Once it gets past midnight, It gets very hard to keep my eyes open.”

The Knowledge Seeker’s blue eyes opened wide and she turned her attention to the canal just a split second before Li and Shanyuan reacted. It felt like goose-pig flesh covered his arms and legs and something sludgy like oil coated his entire body. It was eerie and not something he was used to associating with Spirits.

Consider himself warned.

Jet drew both of his hooked blades and took up a position by Li’s side. Shanyuan fingered his chains, ready to use them the instant he felt they were necessary. Next to him, Jin shifted her body weight to a ready stance and narrowed her eyes but otherwise did nothing.

Shanyuan wasn’t sure what to expect. Maybe a splash or ghostly spectre or something like that. Instead, there was just a heavy silence that weighed on his body, mind, and spirit. Even his
breathing sounded loud in his ears. Then-

“You came.”

A shiver raked up Shanyuan’s spine with the pinpricks of razor sharp fingernails trailing up the back of his uniform. Shit. Shit ShitShit! Why him? How did he not sense her behind him?! Both Li and Jet whirled around to stare at the Spirit currently hovering directly behind Shanyuan.

Jet hefted his swords but didn’t immediately charge. Li glanced briefly at Jin, gesturing for her to move closer to his side, before returning his sharp, pale gold gaze to Shanyuan. Swallowing thickly, Shanyuan slowly and deliberately nodded in answer to Li’s unspoken question. He was alright, for now. On edge and definitely not calm, but he was in control of himself and that’s all that mattered.

Focus, Shanyuan. Focus. What would Master Tengfei do?

“We did,” he said, meeting Li’s gaze and holding up a hand. The Spirit was behind him, threatening him. Therefore, he would be the one to speak her.

“My deal was with the child of Fire.”

Yu Huang that voice was doing things to him that Shanyuan was very ashamed of. Control. Focus.

“So it is,” Shanyuan agreed, tilting his head in a slight nod of acknowledgement. “We’ll be helping him.”

Pinpricks that could draw blood if they touched his skin tapped his spine thoughtfully. “You would do that for someone you barely know?” she asked, sounding genuinely curious. “Why?” The nail pressed harder, a needle that could kill him so easily… “So you can destroy me as soon as he’s finished?”

Damn. “I’m Dai Li,” Shanyuan said. “Li’s a firebender. If anyone catches him firebending, they can kill him or have him arrested. But if I’m there, they probably won’t try anything. Besides,” he added when wintry cool breath puffed by his throat, “the more of us who come, the better your chances of cornering your prey.”

The Spirit paused, then withdrew her threatening nail with a soft, wispy laugh. “So young,” her voice whispered. “So afraid. Tell me, child of Earth, have you ever hated as strongly as I do?”

“Leave him, Kuchisake-onna,” Li said suddenly. “You kept your end of the deal, now let me keep mine.”

Shanyuan forced himself to not hold his breath in the heavy silence.

“As you say.”

:Kuchisake-onna:

“Ah, Knowledge Seeker,” the malevolent Spirit purred. “You return. Will you rely on your charge to protect you again?”

The fox’s hackles raised and she lowered her head, snarling viciously at the Kuchisake-onna. :You test my patience,: the kitsune warned. :I bring a message from the head of my house. He knows of the wound inflicted on you. Harm done to one’s house is something any Spirit understands.”
Harm done to one’s house? But that- Her children. But how- She had been a Woman in White before. Her children were already dead. Was that not the case?

:Hear this, Kuchisake-onna,: the Knowledge Seeker said, all four tails twitching threateningly. :Wan Shi Tong will not interfere with your vengeance. However,: the kitsune bared her teeth and unearthly blue gleamed. :should you harm the boy called Li,: Li stiffened in surprise, :you will inflict the same wound on Wan Shi Tong that was dealt to you. As the head of his house, Wan Shi Tong will have no choice but to act.: ...

...what? What? What? A Spirit had claimed a Human as a part of their house? That was…

Shanyuan stared at Li, hoping to find answers, but was met by an equally dumbstruck expression on the firebender’s face. Li was staring at Zenko like he’d never seen her before. His scarred eye was wider than Shanyuan had ever seen it. Even Jet was stunned. Jin looked torn between smiling with joy and staring at Li with jaw dropping shock.

“I see.”

It seemed the Humans weren’t the only ones surprised by the unexpected news. Yu Huang’s boulders, Li.

“Zenko?” Li whispered.

:So long as your deal with Wan Shi Tong stands incomplete,: the Knowledge Seeker said, brushing Li’s hand with one of her tails while keeping her gaze on the Kuchisake-onna, :you will receive the same rights as one of my house. However,: she added, her ears folding back, :this is your deal, not mine. I cannot directly aid you unless harm is done to my house. I’m sorry.: 

Ah. That made sense in a twisty sort of way.

“Alright fine,” Jet grumbled, drawing Li’s gaze. “We got this far separately, we can finish the job together. She wants revenge? So let’s find the guy and sic her on him. So,” he said, turning to the Spirit with fearless eyes, “who’s the unlucky guy?”

“Jet.”

Jet stiffened, his expression falling slack in shock. His pupils blew wide so the deep brown of his irises were thin rings at the edges. The tips of his swords slipped so they brushed the blades of grass at his feet.

Because she was suddenly there in front of him! Long black hair that must have once been pulled up in a perfect bun now hung loose and free down her back and over her shoulders. Her face was porcelain white contrasting the rose red of her lips beautifully. The morbid tear a bloody red rip through her cheeks from ear to ear. It made Shanyuan sick just to look at.

How did she get there so fast?

The Kuchisake-onna trailed a long-nailed finger along Jet’s jawline and smiled, a macabre image that was as unsettling as it was fascinating. She tilted her head and murmured in a voice that Shanyuan desperately wanted to be aimed at him, “Do you think I’m pretty?”

Shanyuan felt the desire to reply rise in his throat even though he knew she wasn’t talking to him.

“Don’t answer that!” Li cried, grasping Jet’s arm. “Jet. Jet! Don’t answ-”
“Yes.”

“Why are you doing this?” Li pleaded with the Spirit. “I gave you my word. Why are you doing this to him?”

For some reason, the firebender’s voice sounded distant, harsh, abrasive. Shanyuan didn’t understand why that was. Li’s voice had always sounded… hoarse, almost gravely in a way. But never like this. Why was-

This wasn’t right. This was wrong. But it felt so… It was wrong.

The Kuchisake-onna laughed and it was so lovely to listen to. She leaned closer to Jet’s face, her ebony lashes delicately brushing her cheeks. “How about now?”

Something reached into his sleeve - what? Thief! Who would?!- and grabbed hold of one of his chains, yanking it and his arm hard. The abrupt motion caused him to bite his tongue hard enough to sting, shocking himself out of the trance. He blinked and tried to make sense of what he was seeing just as Jin stabbed the hook at the end of his iron chain down into the Kuchisake-onna’s back.

The Spirit threw her head back and shrieked, whirling on Jin with all the fury of her namesake.

“Sorry, Ugly,” Jin spat, her face frightened but determined. “I’m not attracted to women.”

The Spirit hesitated, studying Jin closely. A smile that scraped every nerve in Shanyuan’s body stretched across her entire face. “You have good eyes, daughter of Earth. Strong, brave,” the Spirit said, raising her own blade. “But I’m not interested in you.”

Shanyuan shuddered. Why did he feel so weak and vulnerable? This didn’t make any sense!

“Harm anyone here and I swear by Agni I’ll make sure you never see your children again,” Li hissed, twins blades of flame blazing from his fists, holding back the Kuchisake-onna’s own knife.

That made the Spirit pause, her glistening green eyes wide with indignant fury.

“My children are dead,” she hissed furiously. “You can make no such promise.”

“You’re right. They are dead,” Li snarled back, glaring at the Spirit like an eagle eyed its prey. “But I know their spirits linger in this world, and I know where.”

Poisonous green gleamed. “You would do to me what the traitor did to me?” she wailed. “You would keep me from my children?”

“We made a deal!” Li snapped. “If you attack my friends, I will destroy you and make sure you never have vengeance. I don’t care what the consequences are for me. You broke our deal first.”

“I swore I would not kill those within Lake Laogai,” the Spirit murmured. “I said nothing of those outside its walls.”

“Kill my friends and you won’t have your vengeance,” Li swore.

“My deal was with you,” the Spirit raged, “not them.”

“Why Jet?” Li whispered, hurt seeping into the fury. “Why won’t he respond to me? What did you do to him?”
The Spirit grinned, too many teeth visible in that visceral smile. “Collateral,” she murmured, her lips too close to Li’s for Shanyuan to even stomach watching. “To be sure you don’t have… second thoughts. Like now.” Her eyes narrowed. “And to be sure I see my children again.”

Li winced. “I can’t let you near them so long as you’re like this,” he said after a moment, his eyes sad but fierce. “I can’t trust you.”

“Then you have learned something, little Firebird,” she replied. “Pity.” She traced the tip of her fingernail along the edge of Li’s scar. “I preferred you. My match in every way.”

He blanched, his pupils devouring the gold. “I’m faithful,” he whispered. “Who betrayed you?”

“Who betrayed you?”

Li looked like he wanted to laugh or cry. “I don’t know,” he said in a broken voice. “I don’t remember.”

Enough of this. Shanyuan rooted his stance and lashed out with the iron chain looped around his other hand. The weighted hook looped around the Spirit’s neck and he yanked her back, sidestepping out of the way when she stumbled and tried to wrestle the burning iron off of her.

“Release him,” Shanyuan commanded in his best impression of Master Tengfei’s voice. The Spirit turned her glittering gaze to him but did nothing else. “I am a Dai Li of Ba Sing Se,” Shanyuan said, trying to hide how badly he was shaking, “and I command you to release the boy Jet.”

Yu Huang, if you can hear this prayer, help us. Please.
Unpleasant Negotiations

Chapter Summary

In which Sokka gets an unwelcome welcome and Li isn't quite threatened.

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter... I don't know what was up with this this chapter but it literally fought me every single step of the way. It took me three days to write ~3k words. I ended up using 5 different colors (each color is for a addition made at a different time) for one chapter. This is the first time that has ever happened. Hopefully the next chapter won't be so mean to me.

Side note: Sorry I didn't reply to y'all's comments last chapter yet. I've literally spent every bit of free time trying to work on this chapter. I'll reply to the comments tomorrow. It's almost 2am here, I'm dead tired, and my computer will lose power in 15 minutes. In the meantime, enjoy~

Well, *that* was humiliating. And in front of so many pretty girls too! Geez! It was just *one syllable*! Man, who *threw* someone out of a *building* over one teeny-tiny, itty-bitty syllable? He would bet Boomerang that big, buff guy didn't toss those girls out on their pretty butts. Nope. Just little old Sokka. That was discrimination!

So unfair. He had feelings too. And right now his butt felt just as sore as his ego. Ugh.

Ba Sing Se was so boring. He couldn’t even wander around on his own for a single day without having something happen to him. That actually meant this city wasn’t boring, but eh… Technicalities.

What he would give for a good map and some charcoal. He could plot their trek from the South Pole to the North Pole, mark known Fire Nation held cities and territories, and meet with some soldiers off the Wall -if he could actually find them in the Upper and Middle Rings- and compare notes. Who knows? Maybe he’d be able to figure out where Dad’s Water Tribe fleet was.

...He missed Dad.

And there went his mood. Fabulous. It wasn’t even night yet and nothing had happened all day until he got kicked into a haiku-mashnaga competition and then got *thrown out* of it. And yes, he was not about to let himself forget that. That Macmu-whatsit lady was *so rude*! He’d won that haiku duel fair and square. He just… accidentally used one too many syllables. It was an accident!

Okay, so maybe he’d taunted her too. Dad would have given him a very disappointed lecture for that. At least Katara didn’t know about that. If she did, his butt would be stinging and wet. Gross.

Sokka noticed something flying in the sky far up and away. It looked a lot like... Appa? Excitedly,
he hurried through the university so he was in a more open part of the campus. The last thing he wanted was for the bison to accidentally clip a building and get them in trouble. Well, more trouble than they were already in. Except that Madame Macmu-Ling’s building. That could go kerplunk and Sokka wouldn’t miss it.

Then he heard the shriek. It was loud, high-pitched, and grated against his nerves like dragging sharp ice across metal. He involuntarily winced and ducked, looking around for the source of the inhuman noise. The students wandering around the campus immediately ran into the nearest building, some dropping their things in their hurry.

Okay, so this was serious. Reaching for his Boomerang, Sokka hurried down the street the most people were running from, careful to keep crouched low in case he needed to duck behind a building or something. The main quad of the campus was vacant aside from a few stragglers who quickly slammed the door to the library shut behind them. The sun hadn’t quite set behind the Inner Wall yet but the crystals in the street lamps were already beginning to glow with that strange green light he still hadn’t gotten used to.

He crouched by the library, drew his Boomerang, and listened. Silence. No, actually there was some sound in the distance, beyond the wall surrounding the university campus. What was it with the Earth Kingdom and walls? Seriously. You couldn’t see through them.

Muttering under his breath, Sokka ran across the empty quad, doing his best to keep to the shadows cast by the few trees. When he reached the wall, he slunk along the stone to the main gate and peered around the corner.

At first, he didn’t see anything suspicious. There was no one in sight in the vicinity of the university. Actually, that was a bit suspicious now that he thought about it. He couldn’t remember ever seeing this area so deserted before.

Then the shriek came again. He flinched, his shoulders hitching up in an attempt to protect his ears. That sounded like it came from further to the right. Hefting Boomerang, he leaned around the wall towards the source of the shriek.

Dai Li! It was a Dai Li! Why was a Dai Li here? Wait. Why was the Dai Li attacking that woman?! And why were those other three people not doing anything to stop him? What was going on?

Hold on. Hold on a second. Was that- Tui and La, it freaking was! What was Jet doing in Ba Sing Se?!

The woman on the ground writhed and made pained sounds while her hands grasped at something wrapped around her throat. One guy who wasn’t Jet or the Dai Li crouched by the struggling woman’s side and held something small and golden just above her face while the only other girl in the group began wrapping what looked like a chain around the woman’s wrists.

Okay. That was too much. Sokka narrowed his eyes, reeled back, and threw!

Tengfei saw something flash through the air in the light of the setting sun. It arced up in the air before, impossibly, wheeling around and flying right back towards the blue garbed thrower. It struck the head of an unsuspecting Jet who staggered, clutching his no doubt aching head from the impact. Then it rebounded towards the Water Tribe boy. Except now Shanyuan’s head was in its
path and that was unacceptable.

Chains rattled from his wrists, channeling his chi and steely will to protect. He felt the instant the spinning object tangled in his chains and he yanked, jerking the thing out of its dangerous trajectory and tossing it harmlessly to the ground. A kick and thrust of chi and the ground beneath his bare feet moved, skating him forward so he now stood between Shanyuan and the assailant in blue.

A well-practiced twitch of the wrists and his chains returned to him, ready to be used again at a moment’s notice. He adjusted his stance and thrust down, forward, then up with his hands, imprisoning the Water Tribe boy in a cone of stone.

“Hey!” the Water Tribesman shouted angrily and wriggling in his immovable bonds. “What the heck! Let me go! What are you doing to that woman?”

Tengfei snorted and relaxed his stance. As if he had any reason to answer this boy, who he now recognized as the Avatar’s friend. However, if the Avatar’s friend was here… He chanced a glance at the sky where the Middle Ring Wall rose into the sky and, sure enough, there was that infernal bison flying parallel to the Walls like it was looking for something. Or someone. He’d have to make this quick.

“Apprentice,” he said, pitching his voice so Shanyuan and his crazy friends could hear him.

“Master?!”

Goodness was that surprise? He’d have to train his young partner to be more aware of his surroundings. Tense situations were no excuse to forget to watch for potential ambushes.

“Wha- How did you find me?” Shanyuan gasped.

Tengfei gave his apprentice a look and was not surprised to see the embarrassed flush in the young man’s cheeks. He was surprised to see relief and honest joy there as well. Strange.

“You sick bitch.”

Oh dear.

Fuck! Damn! Ow! His head was pounding!

Jet blinked deliberately, trying to clear his head of the weird fog that clouded the edges of his senses. Not to mention the sharp pulse on the back of his head where something had hit him. Hard.

How had he let himself fall to that bitch? How, damnit? He’d been fully aware of everything around him, including Li’s desperate pleas for him to not answer the Spirit bitch’s question. But he hadn’t been able to help himself. It was almost as if he’d been compelled to answer.

He was furious.

He glared at the Spirit writhing in Shanyuan’s iron chains. “You sick bitch,” he snarled.

Startled, Li spun around and stared at him with hope in his baby sparrowhawk eyes. “Jet!” he cried.

He scrambled to his feet and wrapped his arms around Jet’s shoulders before Jet could react,
burying his face in Jet’s neck. Now wasn’t that an ego boost. Despite the grim, infuriating situation, Jet found himself grinning broadly. He’d do something about Li’s whispered litany of apologies by his ear later. After they dealt with this bitch.

“Are you alright?” Shanyuan said sternly, not letting the Kuchisake-onna out of his sight.

Li stepped away and turned back to the group, but he didn’t quite leave Jet’s reach yet. “Yeah,” he ground out. “You’re cute when you’re mad,” he added, shooting Li a flirtatious smirk. The blush was worth the smack.

“No’s not really the time,” Jin muttered, pulling the iron chain she’d somehow managed to wrap around the bitch Spirit’s wrists tighter.

Shanyuan snickered. Heh. Jet was getting to like this stiff green guy. Then he noticed the Dai Li standing next to Shanyuan and tensed.

“You?” Jet gasped. “Why’re you here?”

The older Dai Li arched an eyebrow at him, sharp green eyes openly judging him. “Why do you think?”

“Hey! Pay attention to me!” someone yelled. Jet blinked and leaned to the side to see around the two Dai Li.

“What the-!?” he gasped in disbelief. He stared at the Water Tribe boy struggling to escape the cone of stone encasing his body except for his head. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here? What are you doing here?” Sokka demanded, his dark blue eye shining.

“You know him?” Li whispered.

“Yeah,” Jet said. “Relax S-“

“No names!” Tengfei snapped, grabbing Jet’s arm.

Right. The bitch Spirit was still listening.

“Jet!” Sokka shouted. “Whatever you’re doing to that girl, you had better stop!”

“Is he serious?” Tengfei said, turning to face Sokka incredulously.

It took a significant amount of self control for Jet to keep a straight face as he nodded.

“Does he honestly not recognize a Spirit when he sees one?” the elder Dai Li asked. “He travels with the Avatar. How can he not know?”

“He travels with the Avatar?” Jin gasped.

Sokka growled and jerked in his rock prison. Jet was certain that if Sokka had not been stuck there, he would have charged Jet weaponless if he had to. Jet and Tengfei shared a look. The elder Dai Li lifted on eyebrow significantly before flicking his gaze up to something in the sky. Jet followed Tengfei’s gaze and growled. Of course.

“Of course it’s the Avatar,” he muttered. “Hey bitch,” he said louder, sneering down at the Spirit when her piercing gaze met his. “You want us to leave you here for the Avatar to deal with? Or do you want to give us a name already?”
She hissed at him, but he felt nothing except for the headache looming behind his eyes. That was going to make it very difficult to sleep tonight. He probably had a concussion which meant he’d have to make Smellerbee or Longshot wake him every hour or so to be sure it wasn’t too serious.

“Swear you will let me see my children,” the Spirit demanded, her poisonous green eyes locked on Li.

“What guarantee do I have you won’t be-spell Jet again?” Li said, moving so he knelt by Jin’s side.

The Spirit smiled and it was almost sweet. “You don’t.”

Li bit his lip but it was Jin who spoke. “You made a deal,” she said. “If you don’t want us to help you, we’ll leave. I’m sure the Avatar will deal with you much better than-”

The Spirit lashed out at Jin with her knife, but Li was quicker, deflecting her blade with his own blade of flame. “A deal’s a deal,” he said. “I’ll get you your vengeance. But you never specified whether you had to be there for it.”

“Traitor!”

“We’re not traitors,” Shanyuan said suddenly. “We’re only Human. We can’t always do something alone. Sometimes we need friends.” He glared. “Just like you need us to get your vengeance.”

The elder Dai Li stiffened and fixed Li with a narrow-eyed stare before turning to Shanyuan. “Explain,” he commanded sharply.

The younger Dai Li shrugged as casually as he could. “Li made a deal with her,” he said, ignoring the way Tengfei’s face drained of color. “He did it to save the other Dai Li in Lake Laogai.”

For a split second, Tengfei looked murderously livid, then the emotion was smothered by calm indifference. Mostly. His green eyes still blazed with rage. “When this is over,” he said slowly, looking at each of them in turn, “we’re all going to have a talk about Spirits, deals, and the utter stupidity of each and every one of you. That includes you, Knowledge Seeker,” he added, pointing at the silent fox Spirit.

:I was not present at the time,: Zenko said sternly, standing and trotting to the edge of the bridge. :And if I had been, : her pupilless blue eyes locked on Li who shrank under her gaze, :that deal would never have been made.:

“Would you rather I let them all die?” Li demanded, getting to his feet with fists clenched by his sides.

“The Dai Li are not your responsibility,” Tengfei said sternly, earning himself a golden-eyed glare. Li tensed, his cheeks slowly gaining color in his fury. “She,” he hissed, pointing a smoking finger at the suspiciously calm Spirit, “was going to carve her way through your people unless someone stopped her.”

“You can’t possibly hope to defeat a Kuchisake-onna on your own,” Tengfei replied in a calm, no-nonsense voice that rubbed Jet the wrong way.

It obviously rubbed Li the wrong way too. Jet couldn’t remember seeing Li so furious. Li’s golden eyes burned and he held himself tall and proud. Like a Fire Prince. Jet swallowed back his unease and swiftly stepped in to diffuse the situation before it exploded.
“Look, we can talk about this later,” Jet said, deliberately sticking one of his hook swords between Li and the Dai Li. “Right now, we just need the guy’s freaking name,” Jet grumbled.

“What guy?” Tengfei demanded.

:*The man who betrayed the Kuchisake-onna and murdered her children,* Zenko said from her place on the bridge. Her ears twitched. :I believe you remember the incident yesterday morning.:

Jet watched as the confusion on Tengfei’s face was slowly overtaken by shocked understanding.

“Yu Huang have mercy,” the elder Dai Li breathed.

With a grimace, Tengfei looked back up at the sky and muttered a curse. Jet looked up and couldn’t help but agree with the sentiment. The Avatar’s bison was too close for comfort. They really did need to speed things up. Especially since they had Sokka under control. For the moment, anyway. Not that that would stop Katara and Aang if they wanted in on this.

If the Avatar wanted to, he could easily attack them from this distance with a strong blast of air. The most that could be done to stop that was for one of the earthbenders to erect a stone wall and block the wind. But if the Avatar touched the ground…

Jet wasn’t a bender but he was familiar with the concept of chi in bending. Tengfei and Shanyuan were probably master earthbenders and had plenty of chi between them to swing around. Li probably did too, despite his hesitance to firebend in the middle of the Earth Kingdom for obvious reasons. But that was nothing compared to the Avatar who had chi to spare. Even if Aang wasn’t trained and didn’t have that much chi at the moment, a boulder in the gut was still a boulder in the gut. Jet knew people who had died from less.

Aggravated, Jet returned his attention to the Spirit bitch who wasn’t there anymore what?!!

“Li!” he cried, raising his swords and looking around him warily.

Jin cried out as a bright blade sliced towards her, missing her face by a hair when Shanyuan grabbed her and pulled her out of harm’s way. Li parried the Spirit’s arm with a block that made a satisfying crack when it made contact with the Kuchisake-onna’s wrist. Unfortunately, there were some advantages to being dead already. Broken bones weren’t exactly broken bones.

The wrist Li’s block would have shattered snapped back into place. The knife flipped from one hand to the other so the Kuchisake-onna could grip his neck. Li’s hands instinctively came up and tried to wrest his throat free.

“Move and I snap his neck,” the Spirit said. No one moved and she smiled. “You want my betrayer’s name. I want to see my children.”

“I can’t let you near them as a Kuchisake-onna,” Li wheezed, his breath coming in strangled gasps. “If you kill him as you are now, I’ll have to destroy you.”

“Why?” she wailed. “They’re mine! I want to see my babies.”

“Then let us handle it from here,” Li said. “Give me his name.”

The Spirit pressed her lips together, temporarily sealing the massive wound on her face. “I pity you,” she murmured. “You have forgotten who did this to you.” she pressed icy lips to the edge of Li’s scar, “and so you have forgotten your rage. You will never know peace until the one who dealt this is gone.”
Li flinched at the unwelcome touch and it was all Jet could do to not slice the Spirit in two. He had no guarantee his swords would strike her before she vanished again and he wasn’t about to endanger Li any more than he already was.

“Knowledge Seeker.”

:I hear you,: Zenko said, her hackles raised in anticipation.

The Kuchisake-onna smiled. “Inform the head of your house I will not kill your pet Human.” Zenko and Jet snarled. “But if he should come to me of his own free will,” her gaze slipped to the fox Spirit, “then you and yours can do nothing.”

Like Jet or anyone here would let that happen.

The Spirit bitch grinned, her gaze returning to Li’s. “His name is Hongqi, son of Quon, a merchant in the Upper Ring.”

...well shit.

“Burn him alive, little firebird,” she whispered. “Burn him to ashes like he burned my children.” She brushed her sanguine lips against Li’s scar. “I will know if you do not.”

“Apprentice,” Tengfei called in warning, shifting to a ready stance.

The Spirit vanished leaving Li staggering back into Jin’s waiting hands.

“Looks like I’m quitting my day job,” Jet muttered.

“You know him?” Shanyuan asked, risking a look at Jet.

“I work for his- Duck!”

Everyone dropped to the ground moments before Tengfei turned and bent a wall of stone out of the ground just in time to break a powerful gust of air. Shit. Shanyuan followed his master’s gaze and cursed. The Avatar’s bison was heading straight for them. They must have seen them. Not that it was hard in this wide open plaza.

“Talk later. Run now. Follow me!” he commanded, grabbing Li’s hand and running over the bridge. He didn’t have to look to know Shanyuan and Jin were right behind him. Hopefully, Tengfei would do the smart thing and join them.
Technicalities

Chapter Summary

In which Tengfei is a distraction and Li is distracted, but something may come of it. It may be a bit... explosive though.

Chapter Notes

A/N: There won't be an update tomorrow because I'll be going to see Avengers: Infinity Wars tomorrow after work. I know vaguely what to expect and I know I'll be a bit, um, in a mood afterwards. So yeah, expect the next chapter on Wednesday most likely. Sorry for the delay, but we all know the emotion.

He’d been right. Of course he’d been right. There were times when he really hated being right. This was one of those times. At least Shanyuan and the others were out of harm’s way for the time being. The least he could do was buy them time.

The Avatar landed on the ground and earth rumbled. Tengfei clasped a fist with his other hand and stone flipped over. The last thing he saw before cool darkness enveloped him was the Avatar’s stunned expression. Sinking his chi into the stone around him, he held on as securely as he could.

Stone and dirt moved around him, attempting to rip control from him. He frowned and held on tighter. He was Dai Li. This was his city. He knew this earth. It knew him. He would not be-

Sunlight and four angry faces burst into view.

Oh. Huh. Well this was not a pleasant result.

“What’s going on?” the Avatar demanded. “Why did you attack Sokka?”

Excuse me?

“Wait Aang!” the newly freed Water Tribe boy, Sokka, said firmly, holding up a hand. Keeping an eye on Tengfei, he strode over to where his odd weapon lay on the ground. He picked it up and inspected it before slipping it back into its sheath on his back. “What was that woman?” he said finally, looking directly at Tengfei. “Look,” he said when Tengfei didn’t respond right away, “I’ve seen a lot of weird things, but that’s the first time I’ve ever seen someone vanish like that.”

Well, well. Apparently, more than one member of the Avatar’s little gang had some sense. Perhaps. Still, it would be best if they left this area. The Kuchisake-onna was gone for now, but that was no guarantee that she would stay gone. For all Tengfei knew, the Spirit would continue hunting until her deal with Li was completed.

He was definitely going to drop that boy up to his neck in the ground and force feed him some hard lessons about Spirits.
“Answer us!” the Avatar commanded, holding his airbending staff out like a weapon.

...Did he really just stomp his foot?

Tengfei groaned. Since when had his life become a babysitting job? Still, that Sokka boy had asked the right question. And since the Avatar had no idea what was going on-

“Lower your weapons and maybe I’ll talk,” he said, his gaze shifting from the Avatar’s raised air staff and the waterbender’s snake of glistening blue water from her water skin.

“Oh yeah,” the waterbender scoffed. “And what guarantee do we have that you won’t attack us if we do?”

Tengfei straightened so his feet were exactly shoulder length apart, tucked his hands into his dark green sleeves, and waited. The young earthbending girl smirked and planted her hands on her hips, fully prepared to wait this out. Sokka eased his stance and shot his friends a look until they too put away their weapons.

“Alright,” he said. “We’re listening. Talk.”

“She was a Spirit,” Tengfei said without preamble.

And oh how amusingly disturbing it was to see their shocked faces. Hell, even the little earthbender looked stunned.

“A Spirit?” the Avatar gasped, a huge smile brightening his face. “You were talking to a Spirit?”

“Looked more like an interrogation than a talk,” Sokka said grimly, lifting an eyebrow inquiringly. Tengfei approved. A bit more practice and that expression might actually get the boy somewhere.

He nodded. “It was,” he said. “She had information my partner needed and she wasn’t being… forthright with us.” Threatening was more like. “So we encouraged her to cooperate.”

“You threatened a Spirit?!” the Avatar cried, his friendly expression morphing into horror then anger. “Why?”

Tengfei tilted his head so his face was shadowed by the nearly set sun. “Because she was murdering my people and it’s our job to stop her,” he said simply.

The Avatar’s mouth fell open and even Sokka seemed thrown by the news. The waterbender and the earthbender were a bit more in control of themselves for the moment. Although the earthbender’s milky eyes were a bit wider than he remembered.

“M-murdering people?” the waterbender breathed. “You mean like the Hei Bai Spirit?”

Hei Bai? What did the Hei Bai Spirit have to do with this? That Spirit was notoriously passive. Had something happened to rouse it to anger? What could have done such a thing? More to the point, did the culprit survive it?

Probably not.

“I doubt it,” Sokka said seriously, shaking his head. “Hei Bai just dragged us to the Spirit World.” It did what?!” “I don’t think that’s what’s happening here, is it?” he added, his dark blue eyes shining in the evening light.

“No,” Tengfei answered, still trying to process the whole ‘dragged to the Spirit World’ thing. How
was Sokka still alive and sane? “She was killing people,” he continued. “Violently.”

“She was… killing people?” the waterbender whispered.

“But Spirits aren’t supposed to do that,” the Avatar said, his gray eyes sad and innocent.

“How would you know?” the earthbender said suddenly before Tengfei could. She pointed to the Avatar and said, “You were missing for a hundred years. Lots of things can change during that time.”

“But Spirits don’t change,” the Avatar insisted. “They are what they are. They don’t change. They just don’t.”

“How old are you, Avatar?” Tengfei asked.


“Did your teachers ever teach you about Spirits?” he pressed.

“Of course they did,” the boy said, sounding slightly affronted.

“And did they teach you about malevolent Spirits?”

The boy paled and nodded slowly. “I know they exist.” That’s it? “And that dealing with them is dangerous.” If only Li had learned that. “But I’m the Avatar,” the boy continued earnestly. “Let me handle it. It’s what I’m supposed to do.”

True. However- “Not all Spirits are good, Avatar,” Tengfei said. “Most are neutral towards Humans, not caring whether we live or die. They just are and so are we. But some are benevolent, like Yu Huang, or Agni, or Tui and La.” He nodded to the waterbender. “Others,” he returned his gaze to young -so young- gray eyes, “are malicious and wish nothing more than to bring pain and suffering on Humans.”

“Why?” Sokka asked.

Tengfei sighed. “Because we exist,” he said. “We’re different. We’re Human. We are change. They’re Spirits. They’re nature is to remain the same.” Although, considering the Kuchisake-onna, was that necessarily true? “The Spirits were here first,” he continued, despite the growing number of questions in his mind. “Some Spirits weren’t pleased when we came along.”

The bison’s low bellow was loud in the ensuing silence.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” he said, deliberately turning away from the group of children and striding towards the bridge, “I have to help my partner take care of a criminal and the murderous Spirit he left behind.”

“Wait.”

“With all due respect, Avatar,” Tengfei said, raising his voice to be heard without having to turn around again, “no. I won’t. This is my city, my job, the Dai Li’s job. You should know,” he added, tilting his head so he could just see their faces in his peripheral vision. “It was your predecessor who created the Dai Li of Ba Sing Se in the first place.”

Do not laugh. It would ruin his well crafted image. Although, he did allow himself a small smirk when he noticed the sly grin growing on the little earthbender’s face. She seemed like a decent

Too much. Make it stop. Please. Please. He didn’t want to fight. He couldn’t fight. Please.

*Father please!*

*Father’s going to kill you. Really he is.*

Burn them alive.

He couldn’t do that. He *couldn’t.*

But… he could.

He blinked slowly, forcing the *here and now* to come back into focus. Shanyuan was in the lead now since he knew this area of the city better than any of them. Jet was pulling Li behind him as they ran and Jin was running next to him. Her green eyes continually flickered behind them as they ran.

“He’s still not coming,” she called.

“He’ll be here,” Shanyuan said, but Li still noticed the uneasy glance the young Dai Li shot over his shoulder.

Before anyone could form a reply, Shanyuan guided them around a sharp corner and into a alleyway between two buildings. Only the dim red-gold of the sunset and the curtained light from one lit window in the taller of two buildings cast light into the alley.

“Where are we?” Jet whispered.

Shanyuan hesitated, glancing up at the window before returning his watchful gaze to the road they had left at the far end of the alley. The other side of the alley was the sheer expanse of the Upper Ring Wall. There were very few ways out of here aside from earthbending.

“Safe,” the Dai Li muttered. “For now.”

Jin fingered the iron chain she still held in her grasp. “Will Tengfei be able to find us?”

Shanyuan nodded. “He will,” he said. His brown eyes slipped to her green before returning to the road. “He will.”

“That’s reassuring,” Jet muttered under his breath.

“Well I didn’t see you coming up with any ideas, genius,” Shanyuan snapping in annoyance.

“Boys,” Jin said, her soft voice cutting through the budding argument. “Behave.” She stared each of them down before they relaxed, somewhat. Then she focused her attention on the other member of their group. “Li,” she asked gently, “are you okay?”

He wasn’t sure what his face looked like, but it must have been awful because Jin hugged him. He swallowed over a very dry throat and hesitantly returned the hug.
“I can’t do this,” he whispered.

“Can’t do what?” she asked gently.

“I can’t-”

He licked his lips and tried to keep his shaking under control. Light paws landed on his shoulder and soft fur nuzzled his neck. Zenko. Her presence soothed his frayed nerves and forced his thoughts to slow down enough for him to actually sort through and comprehend. Acting on instinct was useful sometimes, but other times experience was better.

“I can’t do that to someone,” he murmured, feeling Zenko’s damp nose press against his scarred cheek. “I can’t… kill anyone. Not like that.”

Jin’s grip on the back of his shirt tightened. Li gulped and breathed in, held for three seconds, then breathed out just as a strong hand squeezed the back of his neck, rubbing the tense muscles there. Li lifted his head enough to see Jet standing next to him still, his hand squeezing harder.

Jin stepped back and sighed, her face crunched in thought.

“You may not have a choice,” Shanyuan said, continuing to keep an eye on the end of the alley. “You made a deal with her. You swore you would give her revenge and she demanded you burn the bastard alive.” He shook his head and pressed his lips into a thin line. “I don’t see any way out of this. She was specific. There’s no wiggle room.”

Li grimaced and ran his fingernails through his short black hair. Zenko was silent on his shoulder but offered her emotional support through their mental link. Jet, however, was a bit more vocal about it.

“We can’t trick her, can we?” Jet asked.

Shanyuan shot him a look of disdain. “She has a deal with Li. She will know if he tries to back out of it.” He rolled his shoulders nervously. “And since she’s a malevolent Spirit, I doubt she’ll take that gracefully.”

Wary, Li chanced a look at his boyfriend’s face. The Earth Kingdom boy looked grim. His face was a sickly pale and his eyes were dark with emotion. Jet had lost his family to firebenders. He’d tried to destroy a village because they were living with Fire Nation soldiers and firebenders. This whole thing… It must be getting to him.

Li averted his gaze and crossed his arms as shame crawled back into his mind. Fire may be life, but fire also destroyed. Burn this Hongqi alive, she’d said. Li curled in on himself, reaching up to gasp one of the fluffy tails that curled around his neck. He could feel Zenko’s disapproval of this train of thought, but he couldn’t stop it.

Fire burned. Fire destroyed. Fire killed.

The Kuchisake-onna wanted him to kill. He could do it. He knew he could. But he also knew he would never be able to live with himself. He’d probably waste away from the guilt.

...of his own free will.

Of course. He huffed a wry laugh. Oh, she was clever. She knew exactly what she was doing. She knew he was Fire. She knew he wanted to help. She wanted him. And she knew how to get him.
He couldn’t even be mad at her because it was his own Agni-damned fault. He had been the one to make the deal. He had been the one to make the requirements. He had been the one to offer her a chance at revenge. And he had been the one who sought her out to get the details he needed to exact her revenge.

It was his fault. He would reap the consequences of his own decisions. If he refused to keep his word and burn Hongqi to death, then he would break the deal he’d made. The Kuchisake-onna would be well within her rights to haunt him to the end of his days. If that didn’t drive him to insanity or suicide, then the bad luck that came from lying to and breaking a deal with a Spirit would do the job. Only it wouldn’t end there. It would torment him and make him suffer even after death and into his next life. If he even had one.

On the other hand, if he did keep his word and burned Hongqi to death, he would satisfy the requirements of the Spirit deal. But he would also destroy himself in the process. He would never be able to live with himself. He would be vulnerable. The whispered promises of peace and quiet would probably break through his resistance.

He would come to her of his own free will and there would be nothing anyone could do to stop him. He covered his face with his hands to muffle his laughter. Oh. Clever, Lady Spirit. What a fine web she’d woven for him. Like a fool, he’d walked right into her snare knowing it had been laid for him and still he’d fallen for the bait.

She would get everything she wanted and he would come out with less than what he had now.

“Ow!” Agni, he’d forgotten how sharp Zenko’s teeth were. “What was that for?”

Blue eyes glared at him accusingly. She didn’t need to speak to him. He knew she’d followed his every thought and was not pleased with the outcome. Tough. He didn’t need his memories to know what would break him.

Besides, it wouldn’t really matter much to her anyway. He could just as easily complete his deal with Wan Shi Tong in the Spirit World. It would just be a bit harder. He could still learn the new firebending style.

Blue eyes narrowed.

Maybe.

Ying.

He flinched.

Than.

He shrank in on himself.

Hope.

Oh Agni.

Jet.

…

Shyly, Li lifted his gaze to Jet. The young man was biting his thumbnail as he tried desperately to
find a way out of this for all of them. Even though there wasn’t one.

Or was there?

Burn this Hongqi person alive. She would know if he didn’t do it. She would know.

Burn him alive.

Li was living proof someone could burn and still live. He brushed his fingers along the edge of his scar and felt the distinct pull of the burn on his chest.

Burn him alive.

She never said kill.

Technically.
Revelations and Privileges

Chapter Summary

In which Katara tries to wrap her mind around revelations, Aang learns a hard lesson, Shanyuan does not want to know, and Jet really doesn't understand rich people.

Chapter Notes

EDIT 4/5/18: Ok. See, I know for a fact that I fixed the majority of the errors I found in this chapter this morning before I posted it last night. I'm not sure how or why they're still here this morning, but I'm embarrassed and ticked off by it. I've fixed the errors I found. Let me know if there're more.

A/N: Sorry I didn't update the past couple days. I realized my lease at my current place was up a month sooner than I thought it was. So I was frantically looking for a place that does short term leases. It wasn't easy. That, on top of work, on top of thesis work, on top of the fact this in my university's Final Exam week and today was Commencement... Needless to say I literally fell asleep writing this chapter the past couple night. Not even kidding.

Wednesday night, I fell asleep upright on the couch with my computer in my lap. Woke up with a crick in my neck and went to bed. Last night, I at least made it to my bed before typing and fell asleep there. When I woke up, I pushed my computer off the bed and slept.

...I sleep on a Japanese style futon which is directly on the floor. My computer fell all of three inches. No worries.

Side note: A siheyuan is a Chinese style walled complex in which many family homes, palaces, monasteries, etc, were designed and built. It's based on feng shui. The main house is along the northern wall, the two or more lesser houses are along the eastern and western walls, and the entrance faces the southeast. The more courtyards and halls in complex, the more grand and rich the residents. Quon is rich, but not filthy rich.

Katara didn’t know what to think. She knew Spirits were dangerous. They were immortal, metaphysical beings with immense power. Naturally they would be dangerous. La, the Ocean, and Hei Bai were perfect examples. But, until now, she had always known -believed- that Spirits only ever attacked Humans if they were provoked.

The Ocean attacked the Fire Nation because that idiot Zhao murdered the Moon Spirit. That had been well deserved. Hei Bai only started attacking the people of Senlin Village after its forest had been burned and its shrine had been damaged. It hadn’t even killed the people it took, just taken them to the Spirit World.
But it hadn’t been the village that had burned down the forest. It hadn’t been Sokka either. It had been the Fire Nation. Yet Hei Bai had attacked the innocent people of Senlin Village. Why? Why had Hei Bai attacked the very people who worshiped and respected it? Why hadn’t it attacked the Fire Nation troops responsible?

Now this Kuchisake-onna Spirit was killing people. When the Spirit first appeared in Zuko’s firebent fog, Katara had been awed and afraid. She didn’t recognize this Spirit or knew what to expect from it. All she knew was that she was afraid. Not like she had been afraid of Hei Bai. This was more instinctual. She’d felt small and vulnerable like…

...like prey.

Although that Dai Li hadn’t explicitly said what it was the Kuchisake-onna hunted, he had been very clear about the Spirit being a hunter. Katara hadn’t really believed him though. He was Dai Li. He couldn’t be trusted. Besides, everyone knew Spirits didn’t hunt Humans. They attacked Humans if they had been wronged or threatened.

Though true, some people became fey sometimes, especially during the long polar winters when there was no sun. She could still remember the time GranGran had told her to stay in the igloo with Sokka while she and the other women of the Tribe dealt with the screams. She hadn’t heard the screams again.

But that had been a Human. A fey Human, granted. But still a Human. This was a Spirit Katara had never heard of before. When the Kuchisake-onna had attacked those Dai Li agents in the plaza, Katara had been certain it had been in retaliation. She remembered hearing the rattle of the Dai Li’s chains and the dull thud of rock gloves hitting the ground and the well.

The Dai Li attacked, the Kuchisake-onna had retaliated. Sad but simple.

Except it wasn’t so simple. Not anymore. If what Tengfei had said was true, then this Kuchisake-onna Spirit had been killing people just because she could. Because she wanted to. The meant the Kuchisake-onna hunted people. Humans.

And the best part of this whole insanity? The Dai Li were the ones working to stop her. They were actually protecting the people of Ba Sing Se. That meant they were the good guys.

But that didn’t make sense! The Dai Li served Long Feng. They kept all rumors of the war with the Fire Nation under wraps. They controlled the city through fear and those two creepy Joo Dee ladies. They couldn’t be the good guys.

And what was that about Aang’s predecessor creating the Dai Li? That couldn’t be true. It couldn’t! The Avatar was the Spirit of the world. The Avatar’s job was to bring peace and balance to the world. Why would the Avatar create an order as twisted as the Dai Li?

Unless they weren’t always evil? Assuming she believed the Dai Li in the first place.

Ugh! This was hurting her head. It was all so against everything she’d been taught to believe. Respect and revere the Spirits and they would leave you be. Disrespect and harm the Spirits or their homes and shrines, and you would pay the price. Spirits who harmed Humans just because they wanted to? Because they could?!

That was… That was…

“Aang,” Sokka said, his voice cutting through Katara’s thoughts like a falling icicle. “What did he mean when he said a previous Avatar created the Dai Li?”
“I… I don’t know,” Aang whispered, his gray eyes wide with disbelief.

“He could be lying,” Katara offered half-heartedly.

“He wasn’t,” Toph said, an oddly thoughtful expression on her face. “Besides, if that Spirit was who I think it was-”

“It was,” Katara said grimly.

Toph nodded. “Then we have to assume the Dai Li was telling the truth,” he said.

“But…” This really didn’t make sense. “Since when do Spirits just kill people for no reason?” Katara said, shaking her head and seeking Aang and her brother’s gazes for reassurance.

“It may not be for no reason,” Sokka said, pinching his chin and narrowing his eyes as he considered his next words carefully. “The Dai Li said he was going to help his partner deal with a criminal and the Spirit that criminal left behind.”

“So?” Sokka shrugged. “If the Spirit is acting out because of a criminal then maybe-”

“I should help?” Aang asked earnestly.

“No,” Sokka said sternly, shaking his head. “I think we shouldn’t help out.”


“Because the Dai Li are taking care of it,” Sokka said.

“But they’re Dai Li,” Katara said emphatically. “They serve Long Feng and they’ve been stonewalling us from the Earth King since we first got here.”

“She’s got a point,” Toph said, pointing to Katara.

“They’re also handling this problem without our help,” Sokka said in a firm voice. “We have enough to deal with right now as it is. The last thing we need is to take on more problems that we don’t already have on our plate.”

“He’s got a point, too,” Toph said, pointing to Sokka.

“But I’m the Avatar,” Aang said, looking between his friends. “It’s my job to handle problems with Spirits.”

“Again, point,” Toph said, pointing a finger at Aang.

“Thanks Toph,” the airbender said, smiling brightly.

“Don’t mention it.”

“I know, Aang,” Sokka said, crossing his arms. “But we have more important things to deal with right now.”

“Sokka, that Dai Li said the Spirit was killing people,” Aang cried, spreading his hands imploringly. “We have to help.”
“And we will,” Sokka said, facing his friend directly. “After we talk to the Earth King.”

Aang’s face flushed with anger that Katara could understand. “It could be too late to help by then,” the Avatar said.

Sokka sighed. “Aang,” he said slowly, “there will always be more Spirits to deal with and people to save. If the Dai Li was telling the truth—”

“He was,” Toph interjected casually.

“-then we’ll leave this to them,” Sokka continued. “Look, Aang.” He placed a hand on his younger friend’s shoulder. “We can try to figure out where that Spirit and the Dai Li agents went and stick our necks into a mess to save a few people or- or,” he said louder cutting off Aang’s protest, “we can go see the Earth King now while the Dai Li and Long Feng are distracted, tell him about the eclipse and our plan to invade the Fire Nation and save a lot of lives.”

Aang wilted, his young, innocent eyes watering as he went over the two difficult choices again and again in his mind. “But,” he whispered weakly, “I’m the Avatar. I have to…” He sighed, his breath wavering as he fought back tears. “I want to save everyone.”

“You can’t save everyone,” Toph said, reaching out and gripping Aang’s elbow, startling him. “There’s just no way. It’s impossible.”

“Thanks, Toph,” Aang muttered sarcastically, a dour expression on his face. “That really helps.”

“I wasn’t done,” the earthbender said sternly. “It is impossible to save everyone, Aang. You may be the Avatar but you’re also Aang. Even the Avatar can’t save everyone.”

“But I have to!” Aang said desperately.

“No, you don’t!” Toph snapped.

Aang tried pulling his arm out from his friend’s grasp. “I have to save the world, Toph,” he said. “That means everyone.”

“Does it?” Toph asked sharply.

“Yes!”

“Does it mean the Fire Nation too?” she pressed.

Aang hesitated only a moment before adopting a solid stance and looking directly into Toph’s milky eyes. “Yes. It does.”

Katara bit her lip. She didn’t really agree with that, but Aang was her friend and the Avatar. She would follow him. Besides, no matter what, Aang was going to take down the Fire Lord. That would stop the Fire Nation in its tracks and end the war. What happened after that… Well, they would have to wait and see.

However, she reached up and touched the silver pendant on her necklace with her fingertips, if she found out who murdered her mother, she wouldn’t hold back. She would end them.

So no. Aang couldn’t save everyone. But he could save the world. She had to believe in that.

“Alright,” she said suddenly. She smiled when her friends looked at her. “Let’s go talk to the Earth King.”
Aang brightened. Then he noticed the sunset and winced. “You think he’ll mind us coming so late?” he asked.

Katara leaned on one hip and tossed her long brown braid over her shoulder with a cheeky grin. “I think he’ll be fine,” she said. “If he can throw a party for his just-a-bear at this time of night, I think he’ll be okay with the Avatar dropping in for a visit.”

She tapped the side of her nose and felt her heart grow lighter when Aang practically levitated with excitement.

When Tengfei finally showed up, Shanyuan breathed a sigh of relief. The tension that had built up in his shoulders with every passing second his Master didn’t appear drained away. Now that Master Tengfei was here, they had a better chance of getting the Kuchisake-onna’s vengeance. Or helping Li figure out how to get it, anyway.

He glanced at Li suspiciously and wasn’t sure what to make of the firebender’s expression. The boy’s fingers were gripping the Knowledge Seeker’s tails wrapped around his neck and his pale gold eyes were staring blankly into space. Li looked like he had come to some conclusion that he wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry at. Considering the situation, Shanyuan sincerely hoped that conclusion was a laughable one.

“The Avatar?” Shanyuan asked, returning his attention to his master.

Tengfei gave him a look and Shanyuan wisely didn’t press. The elder Dai Li was in a mood.

“Now,” Tengfei started, tucking his hands into his sleeves and looking directly at Li, “before we go on a wild goose-pig chase, I want to know **exactly** what your deal with the Kuchisake-onna entails.”

When Li didn’t immediately respond, Tengfei cleared his throat. When that didn’t work either, the elder Dai Li shifted slightly and Li yelped and jumped, hopping on one foot and staring accusingly at the spike of rock poking out of the ground. Shanyuan tried to muffle an amused snort behind a hand but failed. Li looked up at him accusingly before his gaze shifted to Tengfei who simply regarded the firebender with calm patience.

“Do I have your attention now?” Tengfei asked mildly.

Li flushed and shot Shanyuan’s Master a flat glare in reply. Beside him, Jet snickered earning him a hurt look from Li. Jet shrugged it off and looped an arm around Li’s shoulders. Jin giggled and Li’s shoulders drooped in resignation. Then Jin’s laughter faded and she turned her soft brown gaze to the elder Dai Li.

“He promised he would help the Kuchisake-onna get her vengeance,” she said, her expression somber, “but only if she didn’t kill the Dai Li in that underground base.”

“What were the Kuchisake-onna’s words?” Tengfei asked seriously. “Her *exact* words.”


Both Shanyuan and Master Tengfei winced. Not much wiggle room there.

“And this time she specified burning him to death,” Tengfei muttered.
“Burn him to ashes,” Jin added.

Tengfei groaned and Shanyuan wanted badly to rub his face with his hands.

“Hey, it could be worse” Jet said, shrugging casually. “She could have asked Li to kiss him.”

Jet bounced his eyebrows up and down suggestively, earning him a sharp elbow to the ribs. It didn’t do much to break his oddly amused mood.

Shanyuan watched Li closely while his Master pondered Jin’s words. There was something in Li’s expression that hadn’t been there before and he wasn’t sure what it was. When they had first hidden here, Li had been distraught and spiraling into a panic attack. Zenko and Jet must have helped him out of it because the despair and fear that had filled the firebender’s golden eyes wasn’t there anymore. Or, they were there, but muted by something else.

Hope. That’s what it was. Hope and... Shanyuan winced. Was this what Master Tengfei felt when Shanyuan got one of his crazy ideas? Because if it was, Shanyuan now had a whole lot more sympathy for his master. Seeing that sly sparkle in Li’s eyes set every single one of Shanyuan’s nerves on edge.

“What did you do?” he demanded in a flat tone.

Li glanced up at Shanyuan, blinked, then grinned. That right there, was terrifying.

“Nothing,” Li said.

“Yet,” Jin mumbled, her lips quirking up. “What are you going to do?” she asked louder.

“Burn him to ashes,” Li answered easily.

This time, Shanyuan wasn’t the only one looking at Li strangely. Even Jet looked disturbed.

“I’m only going to burn him to ashes, alive,” Li continued. “She never said anything about killing him.”

Shanyuan blinked. “Um... You do realize the only way to burn someone alive until there’re only ashes left means killing them. Right?”

Li smirked and, dear Yu Huang below, so did that fox. Spirits have mercy.

Then Jin gasped, covering her mouth with her hands. Her eyes sparkled with amused mischief. “Oh you are sneaky,” she purred. She walked right up to Li and patted his cheek before scratching Zenko’s fur. “I bet you had a hand in this, didn’t you, you sneaky fox?” she teased.

Zenko closed her gleaming eyes and warbled with pleasure, ducking her head and lifting her muzzle so Jin could scratch under her chin.

“Li?” Jet said, pinching Li’s chin between his finger and turning the firebender’s head so golden eyes met dark brown. “What crazy thing are you planning this time?”

His face held captive by Jet’s fingers, Li flushed. “Nothing too serious,” he said finally.

Jet grinned and for some reason all the blood drained from Li’s face and even his scarred eyes widened. Shanyuan watched in fascination as Jet slowly leaned forward so his lips brushed Li’s ear and whispered something too quiet for Shanyuan to hear. Whatever he said, it made all the blood rush back into Li’s cheeks until they practically glowed bright red.
“Okay stop!” Li cried, both hands clutching Jet’s arms and pushing him away as hard as he could.

Jet allowed it and just stood there leering at Li and yes, Shanyuan was certain he did not want to know what Jet had said to Li. It took a few seconds for the firebender to calm down enough to talk.

“I- It- I was just, um…” Jet leaned closer and Li tripped over himself to speak.

“I was going to burn all of Hongqi’s records!”

Jet blinked ignoring the way Jin was snickering. “You’re going to what?” he asked in confusion.

“Oh.” Shanyuan and Jet both turned to Master Tengfei. The elder Dai Li was genuinely surprised and studying Li with newfound interest. “That’s…” Tengfei blinked, “a very unique way of interpreting the Kuchisake-onna’s words.”

Jet made a face and pointed to his boyfriend incredulously. “You understood that?” he said.

Master Tengfei sighed. “This isn’t the first time I’ve had to interpret gibberish.” Shanyuan resented that little jab. "This is the Earth Kingdom, Jet,” Tengfei continued. “We have long memories and keep detailed records on everything and everyone in Ba Sing Se.” His Master’s sharp green eyes flashed to Shanyuan. “Everyone.”

Oh. Oh. Shanyuan’s mouth slowly dropped open in understanding. “Destroy the records-”

“Destroy the person,” Tengfei finished in dark amusement.

“If I can find out where those records are,” Li said, shifting so Jin stood between him and Jet’s impressive leer, “and I burn them to ash, then I would essentially be burning Hongqi to ash.”

Shanyuan felt a smile work its way onto his face. “We might be able to pull that off,” he breathed.


Li’s gaze slid to the side and he pursed his lips.

Master Tengfei narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Li?”

The firebender hesitated, then shrugged. “You can be burned and survive,” Li mumbled, crossing his arms and lifting his shoulders self-consciously. Jin rested a hand on his arm and the fox Spirit nuzzled his scarred cheek. “Besides, accidents happen with fireworks.”

“...fireworks…”

Shanyuan took everything back. They were screwed.

“This is the place,” Jet said, nodding to the enormous house.

Honestly, he wasn’t really surprised Quon was rich enough to afford a place this big in the Upper Ring. The stone walls of the siheyuan style complex were pristine white tinted green in the dim light from the green crystals in the nearby street lamps. The larger main house was situated along the northernmost wall of the rectangular complex. That was where Quon lived.

The courtyard in the center of the complex was lit by green paper lanterns strung along the roof
overhang covering the porches of the buildings facing the courtyard. The courtyard itself was designed to resemble a perfectly manicured garden and pond complete with an island gazebo. The stone walkway encircled the outer edge of the courtyard.

The walkway was lined by a low earthen wall designed to look natural and rough-hewn. There were four breaks in the wall where perfectly earthen bridges arched to a gazebo nestled in the middle of the man-made koi fish pond. A single, green paper lantern hung from the roof overhang of each corner of the gazebo.

Fresh, green grass grew on the two, small man-made islands in the pond where tiny, perfectly trimmed bushes and small trees grew. A carved stone pagoda stood nestled between a short tree and a flowering bush on one of the islands. The little windows glowing a soft green.

It was beautiful and probably cost a fortune to make. Jet tsked and shook his head. He’d only seen this place a couple times and it still blew his mind. Rich people really were something else.

Most of the lights on the second floor were dark, but the main floor was lit with the warm glow of candles and lantern light. The low murmur of voices could be heard through the open windows.

“Wow,” Jin breathed, leaning over the rooftop and staring at the complex in awe. “It’s beautiful.”

“Jet,” Tengfei said in the still silence. “You know this place. Where does this Hongqi live?”

Jet nodded to the smaller house to the left along the westernmost wall of the complex. “I don’t know the guy well,” Jet admitted, “but I know Hongqi’s old enough to move out of the main house.”

“But still too young or too reluctant to find his own place and move out completely of his family home,” Shanyuan finished, nodding. “Alright Li, what’s the plan? Li?”

Jet glanced at Shanyuan and snickered at the poor Dai Li’s plight. He nudged the guy’s shoulder and nodded to the courtyard with a sly grin on his face. He treasured the dumbstruck expression on both Dai Li’s faces when they saw Li and Zenko ghosting along the earthen wall lining the courtyard.

“He’s sneaky,” Jet whispered. “You should see him in his Blue Spirit mask.”

Like that wanted poster. What Jet would give to see Li wearing that in person. He licked his lips. Maybe they could have some fun with that. Later.

And was that recognition in the elder Dai Li’s face? What a fun game this was turning out to be.
Fireworks

Chapter Summary

In which Li realizes he made an oops, Tengfei loses another one of his nine lives, Jin is a clever girl, and Iroh ponders.

Chapter Notes

A/N: IMPORTANT! I feel like I need to explain something right quick. I acknowledge the AtLA is at its core a children's show so some things are glossed over or played up for amusement's sake. However, there are a few things I find very hard to believe. One of those things is the fact Earth King Kuei had no idea the Earth Kingdom had been at war with the Fire Nation for 100 years!

I'm so sorry, but wtf?

Canonically, Earth King Kuei is 25 during the events of AtLA. I'm 27 and I can be a bit oblivious about some things, yeah no doubt. But I don't care how dense Kuei is, there's no way he could possibly miss flaming balls of tar soaring through the sky, crashing into the Agrarian Ring, and the resulting fire/smoke. Fire that intense, contained or not, glows especially at night. The fire glow aside, the smoke would be ridiculously hard to cover up.

Besides, given what we know of the size of Avatarasya (the AtLA planet), it's small. As in roughly between the size of Mars or our Moon. How do I know this? Sozin is supposedly at Caldera City, the Fire Nation capitol, when he sees the glow of the volcano erupting on Avatar Roku's home island at night, and mentions the island is ~100 miles away. Granted, this could be a rough estimate (as in 100 miles more or less), but still. That means the entire Fire Nation is approximately ~150 miles across total.

Take that measurement and apply it to Ba Sing Se. Measuring from its widest diameter, Ba Sing Se is approximately 50 miles across. Or roughly the width of Lake Erie in the United States. That's big, granted, but not ginormous (relatively speaking). Also, visuals of Ba Sing Se from both the show and canon comics appear to depict the Middle Ring at a slightly higher altitude than the Lower Ring. This appears doubly true for the Upper Ring. Also, the Upper Ring is shown to have rolling hills. And the Earth King's palace is roughly dead center of the Upper Ring.

Now, I dare anyone to imagine looking out of the windows of that huge palace overlooking the entire city of Ba Sing Se and not question why they're seeing great balls of fire smashing into the city, burning day and night, and inky black smoke from burning tar and who-knows-what-else rising through the air. Either Kuei is stupid, which he doesn't seem to be (naivety is not stupidity), or he's damn blind.

Which leads us back to what I'm working with for this fic and why I sat on this chapter for a couple days debating how to handle this. Earth King Kuei didn't know about the 100 year war with the Fire Nation? Bullshit. Earth King Kuei didn't know the Earth
Kingdom and Ba Sing Se were still at war with the Fire Nation after the Dragon of the West Iroh broke through the Outer Ring and invaded in 94-95 AG (aka, 5-6 years before AtLA canon)? Absolutely believable.

Kuei would've been 19-20 years old during General Iroh's invasion. He must have known about that 600 day siege. He would've also probably known Iroh lost his son and retreated giving Ba Sing Se the victory. All that? Believable. Kuei's a young king who's not really familiar with how his own city functions. The Council of Five are generals and war is their thing. They'll handle General Iroh's siege. Long Feng is the Grand Secretariat. He'll handle internal affairs. Kuei is the Earth King. He'll handle everything else. Which is very little but can easily be fluffed out for a naive young man to believe it's a lot. Anyone who has BS-ed a word/page count for a school paper understands that concept intimately.

Now to Long Feng and the Dai Li enforcing "There is no war in Ba Sing Se." There was a war in Ba Sing Se. There is no war now in Ba Sing Se. The city won the war, forced the Fire Nation back, and has had peace since. Don't stir up trouble talking about another war. There is no other war. Truth. The Fire Nation was defeated. Truth. There is no war in Ba Sing Se. Truth. Here, there is peace. By the strictest definition? Truth.

Celebrating Ba Sing Se's victory against Iroh's siege 5-6 years ago? Acceptable. Talking about the war currently going on beyond the Walls? Not acceptable. That's what I'm working with. Sorry for the ramble, but I had to explain. Plot holes bother me...

It was still fairly early in the evening so it would make sense if most of the residents were lingering in the dining room of the main house. Sure enough, the large room on the first floor of the main house facing the courtyard was lit by candles and lanterns. Li was too far to hear the low murmur of voices, but he knew they were there.

That didn’t mean the servants would be there though. He would have to keep an eye out for them. Servants were taught to be efficient and unseen. Anything less would result in punishment.

...He knew that. But for some reason, that bit of knowledge did nothing to warm him. If anything, it did the opposite. He shivered.

Pushing the disturbing memory to the back of his mind, he crouched so he balanced on the low stone wall. Zenko crouched as well so her belly brushed the stone in front of Li. If Earth Kingdom residence complexes were anything like the ones he could barely remember, then the family would most likely keep their most important documents stored in the center of the main house. He could probably slip in and find them, but there would need to be a distraction.

Thus the fireworks.

**BANG!**

Speaking of Agni.

Li smirked and leaned forward onto the balls of his feet. Channeling his chi into his feet, he boosted his leap up to the roof of the westernmost house of the complex. And out came the
residents of the main house, staring up at the sky as colors and sound filled the air, just like he hoped they would.

Wait. They were looking up. Had he told the others about the celebration tonight? ...oops. Probably not.

Tengfei just about jumped out of his skin when the first explosion of light and sound assaulted his senses. Fireworks. Fireworks? He quickly patted his uniform, feeling the subtle pack of unlit fireworks tucked securely under his belt, out of sight. Not his. Then where-?

“What the hell?” Shanyuan breathed, staring up at the sky in stunned disbelief.

“That sneaky bastard!” Jet gasped, a vicious grin spreading over his face. Dark brown eyes met Tengfei’s in wicked glee. “He knew what day it is.”

What day it…

The anniversary of the Fire Nation breaking their siege on Ba Sing Se

“Victory Day,” Tengfei breathed.

“Hide!”

The Dai Li reacted immediately to Jin’s hissed command, dropping down flat and pressing their stomachs to the slanted roof facing away from courtyard.

“Someone needs to tell that boy to share his plan with the rest of the team,” Shanyuan grumbled.

“So you admit we’re a team,” Jet said with a smirk.

“This is not a team,” Tengfei said sharply. “This is a train wreck.”

“Ugh, men.”

Everyone turned to the lone girl in the group who was crawling over the slanted roof, methodically making her way towards the western wall. Jin tugged a few stray strands of light brown hair that had escaped her ponytail out of her face and shot an impatient glance over her shoulder.

“Just go with it,” she said. “We know what we’re supposed to do. This changes nothing.”

“We need a plan!” Shanyuan said urgently.

Jin rolled her eyes and groaned. “Women don’t,” she said.

“Neither do I,” Jet said, grinning as adrenaline raced through his veins. “This just makes it more fun. Freestyling is my preference.”

Shanyuan looked at Tengfei, hoping for some instructions. Tengfei just groaned. “Go with Jin,” he ordered with a sigh. “Jet, you’re with me. Plant the fireworks and for Yu Huang’s sake do not get caught.” He waited long enough to make sure his apprentice followed after Jin, catching up to her easily. Then he turned to the wild boy next to him. “Any idea what Li expects us to do?” he asked.

Jet shrugged carelessly. “Other than don’t get caught? No idea,” he said, a cheeky grin on his face.
“Actually,” Jet continued, looking up at the colorful bursts of light, “I may have an idea.”

Well that was one of them, at least. “I’m all ears,” Tengfei said.

Jet smirked and Tengfei knew he would regret this. “Where do you guys usually shoot fireworks off from?” the boy asked.

Where else? “Secure locations where properly trained technicians can shoot them off with little chance of injury,” Tengfei said.

Jet groaned and rolled his eyes, waving his hand dismissively. “That’s the textbook answer,” he drawled. “I mean, where do you usually shoot off fireworks?” he said, winking at Tengfei and tapping his nose.

What? Oh. “Well,” Tengfei said, tilting his head thoughtfully, “I have heard rumors,” he said slowly, “of the… upper class, shall we say, setting off their own fireworks from the rooftops of their homes.”

“Only rumors, of course,” Jet said quickly.

“Yes,” Tengfei said.

“And these hypothetical aristocrats,” Jet said, scooting closer to Tengfei as if to listen to a secret. Tengfei didn’t quite lean back. “They wouldn’t happen to,” Jet shrugged, “say, typically store these rumored fireworks in certain… common places, would they?”

He was definitely going to regret this. “Usually dark, dry places,” Tengfei said, nodding slightly. “Hypothetically.”

“Ah, I see.” Jet nodded for a few, blessedly silent moments. The fireworks continued to explode in the sky. Then, “But it wouldn’t be unusual for rich people to keep a stash of fireworks in their place for nights like this.”

“Hypothetically.”

“Oh, hypothetically! Of course,” Jet hurried to say.

He was really going to regret this.

“No, it wouldn’t,” he said reluctantly.

Jet hummed. Then smirked and darted along the roof towards the eastern wall. With a grimace, Tengfei followed. “When this is over,” he said just loud enough for the wild boy to hear, “I want to know about the Blue Spirit.”

Jet paused and turned back to Tengfei. “You mean more than you already know?” he said calmly, his dark chestnut-almond eyes gleaming with the faintest hint of a threat.

Not one to be intimidated, Tengfei met the wild boy’s gaze with well-practiced patience. He could out wait almost anyone if he put his mind to it. This boy was too impatient. He wouldn’t last. He didn’t.

“Look,” Jet said in a serious tone, “I can’t tell you. I really can’t. And,” he tilted his head and
shrugged a shoulder awkwardly, “neither can Li. Not ‘he won’t,’” Jet said quickly, raising a hand to forestall Tengfei’s questions. “He can’t.”

“Why not?” Tengfei said.

Jet pressed his lips in a thin line, obviously torn. “Ask Shanyuan,” he said finally. “Li told him. I won’t tell you, but I’d be surprised if Li doesn’t expect Shanyuan to tell you.”

He could work with that. For now.

Jin tucked another firework in a section of lattice stonework on the upper corner of the support column and roof of the patio. She cast a wary glance at the courtyard, licking her lips when she saw most of the people move back inside, some ran quickly while others took their time. They were probably hoping to find a better view of the fireworks from the higher levels.

Honestly, she didn’t blame them. Those fireworks really looked amazing. But she couldn’t let herself be distracted. She still needed Shanyuan’s help planting the other fireworks around the complex.

When Li stopped to snitch a few fireworks from the market on the way to Quon and Hongqi’s home, Jin had wondered what he had in mind. He’d handed each of them a handful and told them to ‘have fun.’ Whatever. She still wasn’t completely sure what Li had planned, but she was pretty sure Li was making it up as he went along. So she decided to do what she could. With these fireworks hidden around the courtyard, it wouldn’t take much effort to light them, even for a non-bender like her.

It would definitely create a decent enough distraction in case they needed to get out in a hurry. Li was already inside searching for Hongqi’s records. Hopefully, the residents would be distracted by the fireworks from outside for the time being. But it was never a bad idea to have a backup plan or two.

Shanyuan hauled her back up onto the roof. “Are you alright?” he whispered.

She nodded. “How many do we have left?” she asked.

The young Dai Li dug around in his uniform before pulled out two more fireworks, small balls of black powder that made more bang than light.

“Keep those,” she said. “We can light them and throw them in case we need to run.”

“My idea exactly,” Shanyuan said, nodding and tucking the firecrackers back in his belt. “I have spark rocks too in case Li isn’t available.”

Jin shot Shanyuan an odd look. “You have spark rocks? Do all Dai Li carry those?”


With that a blush? Jin didn’t doubt it one bit. She wondered briefly if it had anything to do with Li? Probably. What didn’t these days?

Suddenly, Shanyuan stiffened and looked over his shoulder at the dimly lit road beyond the complex. What was he looking at? Jin sat up taller so she could see over the young Dai Li’s
A ostrich-horse drawn carriage? At this time of night? Looked nice too. High class and with an honor guard. That meant the passenger was most likely a young woman. No proper woman would ever be allowed to leave her home alone at this time of evening. Once the sun went down, an unescorted woman was usually looking for company. The nightly kind.

But why would a young woman be out in her carriage at this time? And why was she coming to the Quon residence? Unless…

The Kuchisake-onna had been a Woman in White before she changed. Women in White were created by disloyal partners. The Kuchisake-onna’s partner disfigured her and murdered her children. Was this the other woman then?

“It just occurred to me,” Shanyuan muttered under his breath, his eyes wide as his thoughts visibly raced through his head. “Did we have a plan for if someone else not related to this whole vengeance venture thing showed up here?”

No. They didn’t. Jin bit her lip and looked down at her clothes. She was dressed fairly nice, but she probably wouldn’t pass for a high class servant. Quickly, she hurried across the roof back to the southern buildings, ignoring Shanyuan’s urgent hiss for her to wait. The open area between the southernmost building she sat on and the complex wall had bamboo poles and strings hanging drying laundry.

Scrambling down off the roof, dropping the fair distance to the ground. She winced when her ankle twinged but breathed a sigh of relief when it didn’t twist. She hurried to the nearest laundry chord and snatched a mostly dry sash off the chord, looping it around her waist like she’d seen other servant girls do.

Shanyuan was still hissing at her, so she hissed back. It was kind of amusing to watch him flinch back and stare at her like she was something new and confusing. She undid her ponytail and shook out her hair. Then she put it back up, making sure it was messy and hanging loose. She had to look the part, after all.

“I got this,” she said, flashing Shanyuan a confident smile. “Make sure Li finishes what he’s doing. Remember,” she winked playfully, “the Dai Li are coming.”

Shanyuan blinked in confusion so she blew him a teasing kiss-and wow what a blush that was-and ran out of the complex as fast as she could, suitably frightened.

The fireworks were beautiful. Brilliant flowers of green, white, yellow, some blue, and speckles of red blossoming in full bloom in the night sky above Ba Sing Se. There were fewer in the Lower Ring that Iroh could see, but there were quite a few in the Middle and Upper Rings. The sight of them warmed his broken heart.

Ah. Ba Sing Se. The Impenetrable City. The city that had stolen both of his sons, one by blood, the other by heart. Lu Ten would have enjoyed this city had he lived. Zuko would probably tolerate it at best. Iroh chuckled. Yes. Zuko always did prefer more blue sky visible above his head than roofs and buildings. Iroh still remembered the many times Lu Ten carried Zuko on his shoulders so the young prince could be closer to the sky.

With a heavy sigh, Iroh dropped his gaze to the small shrine wrapped securely and tucked away in
the wicker basket in his lap. He could still smell whiffs of incense from the burnt incense sticks. He didn’t fight the tears from brimming his eyes. How he wished his beloved nephew could be here now.

At least Zuko had found something he could do, someone he could love, somewhere he could call home. At least Zuko was smiling once more. Pao’s tea shop would be closing soon. Pity. Iroh would have enjoyed getting to see his nephew again, however much his heart would ache to see Zuko’s blank, unknowing gaze.

A frown worked its way onto Iroh’s face. They couldn’t hide here forever. Ba Sing Se was safe, for now. But Iroh knew his brother. The Fire Lord would not rest until the Impenetrable City fell. Knowing Azula had taken to the field filled the old general’s heart with fear. Azula was clever and had already tried to kill Zuko twice that he knew of.

Wearily, Iroh lifted his gaze to the glowing city with a heavy sigh. He could not stay here forever. Zuko could not stay here forever. They would need to leave soon. Zuko was still the Prince of the Fire Nation. A destiny like that could not be avoided forever. Whether Zuko remembered it or not.

It would hunt Zuko down until he either fled or submitted. The Zuko Iroh knew in his heart would never run from his fate. He would face it head on. …Well, he admitted after a moment’s consideration, Zuko would face it head on after making sure it was the best thing to do and the only option left. Zuko was honorable, but he did not want to die.

Perhaps the Spirits had taken a liking to him. That kitsune…

Something white and very familiar sailed through the sky above the Upper Ring, illuminated by the light of the fireworks. Dear Agni above, do not let Zuko see that. His nephew had made so much progress. Iroh did not wish to see his beloved nephew reduced to hunting the Avatar alone once more. It would break the last little bit of Iroh’s heart.

Zuko deserved so much better.
Crumbled Hopes

Chapter Summary

In which Jin discovers 'the other woman' may not actually be the proverbial other woman and Shanyuan is caught between a rock and hard place.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Y’all. Y’all. This past week. I just... I have had no life. None. I was super productive. I signed my lease so I'll have a place to live in July, I started running a model +200 times for my thesis (still running that actually, made it to run ~65 maybe??), took my Mom to a glass blowing event where we got to actually work glass (yes, I'm serious, it was awesome), see my Grandmother who's almost 90 and has dementia, and worked all week.

I got to this past Monday and Tuesday and decided to punt writing in favor of letting myself recoup. Thing is, I've had this chapter written for the whole week. I just forgot to post it. ...oops.

That said, here you go~

She was terrified. She had hoped to avoid this meeting for a couple days, long enough for the scratch on her cheek to heal. Her makeup only covered it up a little bit. It wasn’t close enough to her eye for her to cover it up with the kohl lining her eyes. The blush in her cheeks helped the redness of the scrape blend in slightly but it wasn’t enough.

She hadn’t done anything. Her family hadn’t done anything. It was all that outrageous waterbending brat’s fault. Everyone knew you fought words with words. Bringing bending of any kind into a high class argument was considered both rude and pathetic. Nevertheless, that ridiculous peasant and her shameful reaction had resulted in shame on Qiao Yan and her family.

The Yan family were minor government officials working closely with the Treasury Department of Ba Sing Se. Their power was arbitrary at best when compared to the higher ranking officials and military commanders, but they came from old money and were deeply integrated in the financial system of the Impenetrable City. In short, they were trusted and had enough in reserve to make even some higher ranked officials pause.

It helped that her family could trace their ancestry back to one of the first banks of Ba Sing Se.

Yet here she was, on her way to beg forgiveness of her betrothed for her damaged face. Qiao wasn’t exactly fond of Hongqi, but she didn’t not like him. They got along, Hongqi was respectable, and their parents approved of the match. But Qiao never felt particularly strongly for the son of Quon the Merchant. She wasn’t fond of anyone if she was being honest with herself.

If her parents found out… She shuddered at the thought. She was a little bird in her gilded cage. As
long as she behaved, sang on queue, and fed from her family’s hand, she would have a comfortable, safe, boring life.

She hated boredom.

Her carriage jolted to a stop and she was thrown out of her comfortable cushion seat and sent sprawling across the floor. Muttering under her breath, she pushed herself back into a somewhat presentable position and waited, listening.

“You must leave!”

Who was that? She sounded young, whoever she was. Young and scared.

Giving in to her curiosity, Qiao scooted across the floor, pushed aside one of the drawn curtains, and peeked out through the breaks in the carved wooden lattice work of her carriage. The strange girl was indeed young, though not much younger than Qiao herself. She was dressed decently enough. Perhaps she was a servant girl from one of the family residences in this district.

“You must leave,” the girl pleaded, clutching the sleeve of Qiao’s carriage driver. “Please, you mustn’t go in there. They’re coming. You can’t be here!”

One of Qiao’s guards grabbed the girl by the collar of her dress and pulled her away from the carriage, lecturing her about approaching anyone above her class. Well said. Heaving a sigh, Qiao let the curtain fall back into place and adjusted her position to something more comfortable. The Quon family residence was barely a block away. She could see the entrance from her carriage. Once she was securely inside, she could-

“The Dai Li are coming! You have to leave now!”

“Wait!”

Qiao was very glad her curtains were drawn right now because her scramble to the open back of the carriage was anything but graceful. She tossed the heavy curtain aside and stuck her head out of the wooden carriage and stared at the servant girl with wide, attentive eyes.

“What did you say?” she said in a firm voice that was much calmer than she felt.

The girl’s soft brown eyes glittered in the green lamplight as she struggled in Qiao guard’s grip. “Please,” the girl cried, reaching out to Qiao with an open, pleading hand, “you must leave. The Dai Li are coming for him. You need to get out of here.”

Swinging her legs gracefully out of her carriage, Qiao stood straight and perfect, just like her mother taught her. “Why are the Dai Li coming?” Qiao asked, gazing at the servant girl. “How do you know this for certain?”

The girl hesitated, glancing to the side. Ooh, interesting.

“It’s my lord’s son,” the servant said, her whole, thin body shaking like a leaf in an autumn breeze. “They’re coming for him. They could take you too if you’re there.”

Qiao’s lifted a perfectly plucked eyebrow and pursed her lips. “And who is your lord?” she asked.

The servant girl met Qiao’s eyes earnestly and said, “Quon. His son is Hongqi.”

Qiao considered the peasant’s words for a moment. Then she scoffed. “You’re lying,” she said.
The girl’s face paled, then hardened with determination. “No, I’m not,” she insisted.

“Why are you lying?” Qiao asked curiously, ignoring the peasant’s words and strolling closer to the girl. “Is there a reason you’re dragging my betrothed’s good name through the coals?”

The shock on the girl’s face was genuine which was both amusing and intriguing. Why surprise?

“You’re his betrothed?” the peasant girl gasped in disbelief.

Qiao crossed her arms over her chest so her freshly painted nails were visible against her cream colored sleeves. “I am,” she replied.

The peasant’s expression was of open confusion before crumbling into sadness. “How long have you been Hongqi’s betrothed?” she asked.

What kind of question is that? “Are you implying something, peasant?” Qiao asked, tapping an impatient finger on her arm.

“Well, yeah,” the girl said, straightening and crossing her own arms, deliberately mimicking Qiao’s stance. How dare she. “Because if you’re Hongqi’s betrothed, and you have been for a while, then that means you’re not the other woman.”

“Excuse me?” Qiao gasped, personally offended. “How dare you!”

“Hongqi already slept with another woman,” the peasant said sharply. “She had kids.”

No. Qiao had worked too hard for this. She wanted this match. She needed this match. It was the only way to maneuver herself to a more influential position. Hongqi wouldn’t dare disgrace her in such a way.

Taking a deep breath, Qiao capped her fury behind the smooth mask of an Upper Ring citizen and stared down her nose at the audacious brat who disturbed her evening.

“You’re lying,” she said calmly. She uncrossed her arms and waved at her guard dismissively. “Keep her out of my way,” she commanded as she made her way back to her carriage.

“Fine. Ignore me. Walk right into the Dai Li’s hands. At least wait until after the explosions, though,” the girl shouted.

Qiao froze. Explosions? The fireworks?

“If he’s still in one piece, then he may want some nighttime company,” the peasant girl said, much to Qiao’s mounting fury. “I wasn’t lying,” the little girl continued. “The Dai Li are coming for Hongqi. You want to know why?”

Frigid with fury and a little fear, Qiao fought the urge to turn and slap the impudent peasant across her pretty, unmarred face and leave. But, however much she wished she wasn’t, she was curious. If there was even the slightest chance of the bitch peasant telling the truth and the Dai Li were on Hongqi’s doorstep, then Qiao needed to be ready. She wasn’t about to lose everything she’d worked so hard for.

Hissing in annoyance, she turned on her heel and glanced back at the brat. The peasant was standing calmly in the firm grasp of Qiao’s guard. The brat’s eyes flashed with victory and Qiao hated it. She would bear with it, however. For now at least.
“You have ten seconds,” Qiao declared. “Impress me or my guard tosses you to the City Guard for defamation.”

Although the brat’s eyes gleamed, there was no other outward sign of pride or victory. The girl didn’t smirk or grin or lift her chin in defiance. She just stood there, her eyes hard and… sad?

“He murdered his lady friend’s children,” the girl said.

Qiao felt her world crumble beneath her feet. She may not have loved Hongqi, he was just a part of her maneuvering, after all. But she did like him as a person. He was nice, polite, and respectful. He wouldn’t… He couldn’t… Who would do something like that? To children?!

“…you’re lying,” she whispered, her voice quaking with the roiling emotion making her chest ache. It couldn’t be true. She wouldn’t believe such nonsense. Not without definitive proof.

“I’m not,” the girl said, her voice firm and unwavering. “You don’t have to believe me. The Dai Li are already there at Quon’s place. By tomorrow morning, Hongqi won’t exist. They’ll ruin him like he murdered those children.”

Qiao swallowed thickly. It was horrible. She couldn’t believe it. She couldn’t allow herself to believe it. If she did then…

“You’re wrong,” Qiao whispered.

Please be wrong.

“I’m not.”

Her perfectly crafted mask shattered as tears slipped down her eyes. She turned away from the girl, trying to regain control of her composure. Her entire body was shaking and her throat was raw and made it difficult to swallow. Children. She may not want to give birth, but she didn’t hate children. She loved them. She adored children. She always wanted a younger sibling to spoil.

This could not be true.

“If that’s true,” Qiao finally managed to ask around her dry, raw throat, “why tell me this?”

“Because you aren’t involved,” the girl answered simply. “I thought I could trick you into leaving. I guess I could have just told you. That was my fault. I didn’t want you to get involved in this. It’s bad enough already.”

Qiao snorted in a very unladylike manner and shook her head. “I wouldn’t have believed you anyway had you just told me,” she said. “I still don’t. Not really.”

But she did and it scared her to death. At least the peasant didn’t call her on it.

“Milady?”

Right. She was an Upper Class lady. She could not be seen in such a state in front of her guard. It would be disgraceful. Now was one of those times she really wished she had her parasol. She would make that waterbending peasant pay for ruining her favorite parasol and dumping her into the canal.


“Release her,” she commanded her guard. “Peasant-”
“My name’s Jin,” the girl said.

“I didn’t ask,” Qiao said sharply. “Come join me in my carriage,” she continued in a softer tone. “Don’t you know it’s not wise to wander the streets of Ba Sing Se alone at this time of night?” She lifted her arm so her sleeve covered her quivering lips. Monkey-feathers. She still wasn’t fully in control of herself yet. “Someone could make the wrong assumption,” she said, deliberately lowering her sleeve and gliding back to her carriage.

“I can’t,” the peasant girl said and Qiao stopped halfway into her carriage.

“Why not?”

“Because I only came to warn you,” the girl said. “I have to go back before something happens.”

Like the Dai Li coming down on their heads? Qiao snorted before she could stop herself. “What could possibly happen that’s worse than the Dai Li?” she said, turning to look at the peasant over her shoulder.

An explosion of dust, rock, smoke, and fire was her answer because of course it was.

Everything had been going smoothly until it suddenly hadn’t. He hadn’t been paying attention to the inner courtyard. Master Tengfei would give him an earful about that later. He might not hear it though. Hongqi wasn’t a master earthbender, but he was good and he had the element of surprise.

Heh. Element. Oh... He probably shouldn’t crack jokes right now. Laughing. Not good.

Granted, he’d reacted quickly enough. As soon as the assault had begun actually. It had been a matter of muscle memory to fire his rock gloves at his attacker. He’d been mildly surprised when Hongqi managed to dodge the first glove and bash the second aside with an earthbent boulder. That boulder was promptly thrust directly at him with more force than accuracy.

That was the second surprise he’d received. Hongqi was a decent earthbender. With a bit more work, Shanyuan wouldn’t have been surprised to see his opponent a new Apprentice of the Dai Li. Minus the whole murdering children thing. That definitely put a damper on things.

Damp. Heh. Wow. Who would’ve thought his sense of humor would come out now of all times? Master Tengfei would be so proud, after he finished lecturing him. Maybe he’d even get to hear the whole lecture. That’d be nice.

At least Li hadn’t been caught yet that Shanyuan knew of. That was a plus in his ledger. Li may be a firebender but the guy was slippery as any waterbender Shanyuan had ever met. And he’d been to the docks. He’d met waterbenders. They dealt with fish and fish were slippery little fuckers.

Eheh. His mother would have to wash his mouth out with soap for that one. Who knows. Maybe he’d actually see her again soon. He missed her.

Last Shanyuan saw, that wild boy Jet had been shouting for them to “cover him” while he swung up to the tallest rooftop with those ridiculous hook swords of his. Really though. Who used hook swords these days? Not many. Shanyuan had met a few soldiers on the Wall and none of them used hook swords. Just spears and bows. A few used swords but not often.

Fabulous. Now he was rambling. He blinked to clear his head. Naturally, that was when the whole
place exploded in color and fire and light. It was so bright. Damn. It was like someone had set off a
dozen fireworks all at once in the same place.

Well, he and Jin had planted those fireworks around the courtyard earlier. But that shouldn’t cause
that kind of explosion. Fireworks were fine as long as they were controlled. Fire? In a city? Not
good. Fire in close quarters spread too easily. Most of the buildings in Ba Sing Se might be made
of stone for obvious reasons, but fire still had a nasty tendency to spread.

Jet probably made that explosion. The guy was just crazy enough to pull that off. Master Tengfei
would fix it though. Without a doubt. Hopefully. He wouldn’t mind staying awake to see that.
That’d be nice.

Laughing. Not good. Right.

….weird. He felt a bit fuzzy. Was that normal? His ears were ringing too. Probably from the
explosion of fireworks. Too much sound. He should probably try to get up and do something about
that, by the way. Probably.

*SHIT! FUCK!*

Okay. Sitting up. Bad. Not doing that again.

Wait. Wait. Hands. Why were there hands on him? Why were they *under* hi- shit!

“Shu’s *balls!*”

“…mouth on him… he?”

Who the fuck was that?

Ugh. Everything hurt. It hurt so bad.

“…ay with me….”

Hurt like Mother holding him down to wash his mouth out with soap.

“…Shany…”

Heh. Mother. Oma and Shu, he missed her. She was warm and safe and everything his father
wasn’t.

“…mother …why…”

Warm like that bird there. Warm and safe.

“*Wake up!*”

...pretty bird...
Chapter Summary

In which Li finishes the job, gets bad news, and discovers 'bad' is actually worse than he thought.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Due to life, work, and my thesis, I probably won't be able to update every single day for a while. It'll probably be more along the lines of every other day or every three days. ^^; Sorry. Please accept this chapter in apology.

Also, the type of firebending I'm drawing from for Li here is based on the Bhanti Tribe's firebending from Korra. I hated Korra. But I love parts of the show, like the two-parter about the first ever Avatar, Wan, and the Bhanti Tribe. Did y'all know the Fire Sages and subsequently the Fire Lords are descended from the Bhanti Tribe in canon? Hmm~

For some reason, it was surprisingly easy to find where the family’s records were kept. Li was beginning to suspect his missing memories were feeding into his conscious mind a bit more than he originally thought. It was taking him a while to crack the lock on this trunk though. He couldn’t just firebend the metal like he wanted to because it would not only ruin the lock, which isn’t what he wanted to do, but it would also make it obvious a firebender was involved.

He couldn’t do that. This whole plan hinged on the Dai Li taking credit for vanishing Hongqi, figuratively and literally. It was the only way they could all get away with making that two-faced son of a batchfire pay for what he did. The fact it would finally put the Kuchisake-onna to rest and end her murderous tendencies just made the deal all the sweeter.

Even if the thought of his deal with her still frightened him.

:It should. That was a mistake.: 

It wasn’t like he had much of a choice.

:There is always a choice.: 

Maybe. But if the choice was between the deepest depths of the Ocean’s gullet and the darkest bowels of Yu Huang’s cavernous asshole, then it wasn’t much of a choice.

...he wasn’t sure what to make of the ensuing silence so he swallowed and continued working the lock. The final snick followed by the latch snapping open was a glorious sound. Unfortunately, the thunderous explosion and accompanying violent shudder of the entire building was anything but pleasant.
What in the-?!

:Focus:.

Right. Papers. As quickly as he could, he lifted the trunk’s lid and sorted through the scrolls and sheaves of papers. He didn’t have to read entire documents, thank Agni, but he did have to skim each one to be sure he seared every mention of Hongqi from existence. It took much of his concentration to just sear the characters so they were completely unreadable without burning the paper.

This was the part he was most nervous about. He didn’t mention this to the others because he wasn’t sure they would approve. He knew Jet wouldn’t. Well, he hoped he wouldn’t. Jet was handling the whole ‘I’m a firebender’ revelation surprisingly well so far. It warmed Li’s heart. But it also scared him. He didn’t want to think about how he would handle himself if Jet ended up rejecting him after this, however slim the possibility.

He knew how he would handle it, he just didn’t want to think about it. Simply because he wouldn’t be able to handle it.

:Li:.

His hands were shaking. He breathed in, held it for three seconds, then breathed out. His hands stilled and his thoughts calmed down, focusing back on the problem at hand. Get rid of Hongqi.

He finished with the scrolls as the sounds of exploding fireworks and the tell-tale rumbles of earthbending continued to echo from outside. Taking care not to go too quickly, Li did his best to be efficient. Now that he had finished wiping Hongqi from the scrolls, he didn’t have to be overly careful.

Shuffling through the loose papers, Li separated them into three piles: those that only mentioned Hongqi, those that were all about Hongqi, and those that didn’t mention Hongqi at all. Those that had no mention of the murderer, he set back into the trunk. Those that were all about Hongqi, he burned to ash without a second glance. The ones that only mentioned Hongqi, he skimmed through, scorching away Hongqi’s name and any direct mention of him.

:Someone’s coming:.

What? No. He wasn’t done yet.

Sure enough, a couple seconds after Zenko alerted him, Li heard the soft brush of socked feet on the stone floor approaching the door. Setting the finished stack of papers inside the trunk, Li gathered up the unfinished papers and darted to the wall by the door to the room. He really hoped whoever came here wouldn’t get in trouble for what Li was about to do.

The feet ran to the door, then right past it.

What? That didn’t make sense. Li’s luck was hardly ever this good.

He shared a worried glance with Zenko before swallowing and hurrying back to his spot by the trunk. He felt every single second pound in his chest in time with his heartbeat. He really hoped his heartbeat was faster than the passing seconds because if it wasn’t, then Li was taking way too long to do this.

Finally -finally- he finished. He prayed he hadn’t taken too long. Replacing the papers into the trunk, he made sure everything was neat and tidy. The best way to keep suspicion to a minimum
was to make sure there was nothing to be suspicious of in the first place. He looped the lock back through the trunk’s iron hoop and latched it securely. Then he pushed the trunk back into the corner where he’d found it.

Getting to his feet, he waited for Zenko to leap up onto his shoulders before slipping out of the room as quietly as he could. The others were definitely creating an efficient distraction outside. It was a bit more… explosive sounding than Li anticipated, but he probably had Jet to blame for that.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor and Li skidded to a stop, staring ahead of him in horror. There weren’t any doors along this section of the hallway. He could backtrack, but that would take time and time was something he didn’t have. There was a table set against the wall of his right but it wouldn’t hide him in the least.

He really wished he had his mask and dao. Next time he’d make sure he had them. It just didn’t feel right doing discrete missions like this without those. Agni above, please don’t tell him he was an assassin or thief in his past life. He wasn’t sure his heart could take that.

Zenko’s damp nose bumped his cheek in a show of support and reassurance. Li reached up to brush her fur in gratitude before shrugging her off his shoulders. The footsteps continued to approach as he pressed himself against the wall by the corner and crouched.

The moment the person rounded the corner, he darted between their body and the wall, spinning to his full height and looping his arms into a choke hold from behind and pressed. The servant barely had time to comprehend his presence before their consciousness began to lag. For a couple seconds, blunt nails desperately scrapped at his arm currently hooked around the servant’s throat. Then the person slumped into unconsciousness.

Li loosened his hold and eased the servant down to the floor as quietly and gently as he could. He briefly debated moving the body, but ultimately dismissed the idea. It would take more time he couldn’t spare and the servant would still most likely remember where they were when they were attacked. And even if they didn’t, there was no way anyone could miss the attack. Finding an unconscious servant shouldn’t raise too much suspicion either way, relatively speaking anyway. So it wouldn’t make much of a difference.

He still paused to take the servant’s pulse just to be sure they weren’t dead before hurrying around the corner and down the hall. The fox Spirit ran beside him, her eyes shut so their eerie glow didn’t give them away. He stopped at the first window he came across that didn’t face the courtyard, climbed out of the house, and hauled himself onto the roof.

What was left of it anyway. What by Agni’s sacred fire happened out here?!

The roof and top floor of the tower at the northwestern corner of the complex, directly opposite of the corner where Li had been working on the Quon family records, was in flames. Flames that exploded in sparks of color and shrieks as fireworks zinged through the sky and out into the courtyard. It looked like someone had put a bunch of fireworks in the top floor, lit them, and let them explode all at once.

Jet. Definitely Jet.

Li could feel the flames licking the wood, leaving black soot on the stone, and exploding with each burst of blasting powder. The stone should resist the heat and flames, but it would be vulnerable to the explosions. Besides, their goal here was to get rid of Hongqi not the entire Quon family.

Fur brushed his pants as Li focused his senses on the flames, feeling them dance along his nerves.
Breathe. In, hold, out. In, hold, out. In, sink his chi into the flames, hold, let the flames be, out, slowly, carefully, ease the fire down to a manageable blaze that could be safely put out. In, deeper into the blaze, hold, feel the fire’s hunger, out, dampen the hunger with his own control. In, so warm, hold, ease the flames so they burned to the beat of his heart, out, the fire was his.

Breathe, lower, cool, soothe, starve, smother-

“Li!”

Jolted from his bending trance, Li’s control slipped and the fire blazed once more. It was nowhere near as bad as it had been, but unless someone began fighting the fire, the complex would be in jeopardy. Li blinked in mild confusion as his chi, still ragged at the edges where their connection to the fire had been suddenly and prematurely broken, recoiled back into his spirit.

“Li, are you with me?”

Jet. Right. They were short on time. They had to get out.

He swallowed and nodded. “I’m here,” he said, shaking his head in an effort to clear it. “Where’re the others?” he asked, turning to the Earth Kingdom boy.

Brown eyes narrowed and glanced down at the courtyard that was practically demolished now from the earthbending battle. “Shanyuan’s been injured.” No. “He got hit and thrown through a wall.”

“What?!” Li gasped, stunned.

“Jin’s with him,” Jet said hurriedly, “but we need to get him to a healer. Now.”

Li nodded and began following Jet across the roof towards the wall surrounding the complex. “How bad is it?” he asked.

His mind was already calculating the quickest route to Roulan’s clinic. Was that even the best option? Was there another healing clinic here in the Upper Ring? Would they have to- He did not like the look on Jet’s face when the other boy looked back at him.

“It’s bad,” Jet said grimly. “Tengfei’s going to kill Hongqi. We do not want to be here when he does.”

Two short cracks followed by a loud thud that vibrated the building the two boys stood on emphasized Jet’s words. Well, at least Li wouldn’t have to lie when he told the Kuchisake-onna Hongqi was dead. It wasn’t the outcome he preferred but it was deserved. Even though he hated himself for thinking that.

Jet jumped to the wall and ran down its length to the southeastern side before hopping to the ground below. Li followed on Jet’s heels. He briefly wondered why there was a ostrich-horse-drawn carriage there and was that a noble woman? And Jin? And-

Oh Agni.

“Shanyuan,” he breathed. He joined Jet on the ground and rushed to the injured Dai Li’s side. “What happened?” he demanded, dropping to his knees by Shanyuan and pressing two fingers to his friend’s throat to check his pulse.

“Who are you?” the noble woman demanded, staring at him and Jet in surprise.
“It’s alright. They’re friends,” Jin said quickly, continuing to brush Shanyuan’s hair from his face. She turned her attention to Li and Jet. “I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “Something exploded and he flew through the wall.”

The hat Shanyuan and Tengfei wore as part of their Dai Li uniforms was on the ground by her side. She must have taken it off before lifting his head.

“The wall exploded and he flew out with it,” she said, looking fearfully at the hole blasted through the Quon residence’s wall.

“Boulder to the gut,” Jet said in clipped tones. “I saw it happen. Hey, buddy,” he patted Shanyuan’s cheeks when the Dai Li’s hazy eyes began to drift shut. “Stay with me.”

Zenko pushed between Li’s arm and Shanyuan’s body, sniffing the young man’s chest. The noble woman’s eyes widened when she noticed the fox Spirit but she didn’t flinch away so much as blink and look away. She didn’t speak but she listened closely.

“Shanyuan,” Li called, leaning forward so he could check the Dai Li’s pupils for light sensitivity and responsiveness. “Shanyuan, can you hear me?”

The Dai Li blinked sluggishly. “…mother…” he murmured.

“He’s been calling for his mother for the past minute or so,” Jin said, looking between Jet and Li with worried eyes. “Why would he do that? He’s not dying.” She gulped.

Jet rested a gentle hand on Shanyuan’s vulnerable gut and pressed carefully. He winced and shot Li a look. Li did not like that look. Then Zenko wined, soft and high pitched and heart wrenching. Leaning forward, Li tenderly placed his hands on Shanyuan’s stomach where Jet’s had been and felt.

He immediately wished he hadn’t. He couldn’t see through the clothes and skin and he was glad. He could only imagine the internal damage done to Shanyuan’s insides from a wound like this. If this wasn’t treated fast, it would be fatal.

“We need to get him to a healer,” Li said sharply. “Now.”

“Roulan’s clinic is in the Lower Ring,” Jin said.

“That’s too far. He won’t make it,” Jet said, shaking his head. “I’m not familiar enough with the Upper Ring to find a clinic up here.”

“You don’t need to,” the noble woman said abruptly, cutting through their conversationstartling them. “We can take him to my house. My family’s healer can take care of him until he’s stable enough to move further or another healer can take custody of him.”

Li stared at the woman in surprise and confusion. A quick glance at Jet and Jin revealed the same confusion on their faces.

“I’m sorry,” Jet said. “Who are you?”

The woman looked straight at Jet with the best judgmental once-over Li had ever seen. Well, not the best. She could outdo this woman without even trying but-

…who was she?
“I’m the noble who’s going to save your friend, peasant,” the woman said in curt, clipped tones that dripped of well-bred manners.

Jet stared at her, huffed a disbelieving laugh and sat back with a stunned expression on his face. Li did not want to get in the middle of this. They didn’t have time.

“Alright bitch,” he heard Jet say, glancing up to see a wry smile tugging at Jet’s lips and the woman’s lone arched eyebrow. “Get your carriage ready. You’re walking, he’s riding.”

Zenko nudged him arm with her damp nose, whining softly and pawing gently at Shanyuan’s side. Li had never seen her act like this before. It scared him. If she thought Shanyuan was dying, then he very well might be.

Brown eyes slipped shut in another slow blink. They didn’t open.

“Someone has to stay with him,” the woman said without giving ground.

Li frowned and leaned up so he hovered over Shanyuan’s face. The young Dai Li’s eyes were still closed and his breathing was shallow. He wasn’t surprised. Every breath probably hurt like a fire blast.

“Shanyuan,” he called softly, cupping one of his friend’s cheeks with his free hand.

“There will be,” Jet said, grinning viciously. “Jin,” he said, turning to look the girl in the eye, “you stay by his side. Let me or Li know the instant something changes. Understand?”

“Shanyuan, can you hear me?” Li called, cupping the other cheek as well. He bent some of his own heat into his friend’s body through the contact hoping the increase in warmth would rouse the Dai Li.

Above him, Jin nodded. “Got it.”

“I’ll be riding in my carriage as well,” the noble woman said, getting to her feet. “Guard, help them put the patient in my carriage.”

“You’re being awfully nice, for a noble,” Jet said in a tone that practically oozed sarcasm. “Li,” he said, his tone changing instantly to something warm and worried. “We need to move him.”

Li tilted his head to Jet in acknowledgement with taking his eyes off Shanyuan’s face. “Shanyuan, I need you to open your eyes. Can you do that for me?” he asked, pitching his voice so the shaking that was beginning to work its way through his body wasn’t audible in his voice.

“Open his… Shit!” Jet cursed. “Shanyuan! Wake up!”

“Shanyuan!” Jin called.

“Shanyuan!” Li commanded.

He sank his chi into Shanyuan’s body, feeling the heat there. The others’ voices became muddled the deeper he went. There was fire here. Weak, fluttering as if buffeted by a strong wind, guttering as if at the end of the wick, but struggling, fighting. The heat coiled around the flame, protecting it as best he could.

But each breath damped it. It wasn’t right. Breath meant firebending. Firebending meant Fire. Fire was life.
Fire was life.

Shanyuan’s Fire was fading despite his best efforts to fight it. He needed help. It wasn’t the kind of help Li could offer. Li wasn’t a healer. He knew he could sew a wound shut on the battlefield - how did he know that? Did he want to know? - but he wasn’t a waterbender. He couldn’t heal what Shanyuan needed healed.

But he could give Shanyuan a command he knew would be obeyed.

“Wake up!” he said, channeling his chi, heat, and Fire into the command.

Shanyuan’s whole body jolted and the little Fire in his spirit stopped guttering. It was still weak and needed nurturing, but Li couldn’t help with that. A true healer was needed for the rest. All Li could do was keep pulling Shanyuan back from the brink.

“…pretty bird…”

What?

Confused by Shanyuan's odd words, Li blinked back to himself. Brown eyes the shade of Ying’s hair stared up at him. They weren’t bright, but they were open and they were somewhat aware. That was all Li could ask for at the moment.

Without thinking too much into his action, Li sat back and unbuttoned his outer layer.

“What are you doing?” the noble woman asked, aghast.

“Jet,” Li said, ignoring the question, “when I tell you, I need you to lift Shanyuan’s body up. I’m going to slip this under him and we’re going to use it to carry him to the carriage, alright?”

“Got it,” Jet said, nodding sharply. “Jin, hold his head still. Talk to him. Keep him awake.”

“Right,” Jin said, her gentle eyes flashing bravely.

“Noble,” Jet said, looking up at the noble woman, “get in your carriage and be ready to help position him. Guard person, go with her. We’re going to have to do this quickly.” He looked back at Li. “You ready?”

Li finished spreading out his outer coat so it stretched along the ground by Shanyuan’s side and nodded. “Ready,” he said. “Lift.”

Jet slipped his arms under Shanyuan’s body and lifted, much to Shanyuan’s vocal discomfort. Li steeled himself against his friend’s pained cries and pushed his coat underneath Shanyuan’s body as quickly and efficiently as he could. He did not want to have to do this again. Once was bad and painful enough.

“Done,” he said and Jet eased Shanyuan’s body back down to the ground.

The Dai Li’s cries weakened to pained groans and tears dripping down pale cheeks. Li waited until he and Jet grabbed handfuls of the fabric before looking at Jin. “When we lift, hold his head,” he said. “Keep it in line with his body as best you can, okay?”

Jin nodded and got into a crouch, watching the two boys for her cue.

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Jin nodded and got into a crouch, watching the two boys for her cue.
“Ready,” Jet said, nodding.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

Shanyuan screamed.
Decisive

Chapter Summary

In which Jet is perceptive and takes advantage of weakness, a guard is not okay with this, and a deal is almost completed.

Chapter Notes

EDIT 5/27/18: I went through and edited this chapter this morning and I'm so sorry for the mistakes. I didn't realize how many there were. So sorry. *facepalm* I've fixed as many as I could find.

A/N: Sorry for the wait again. Since this is Memorial Day weekend (aka, a long weekend), I'm going to try to update another story(s) this weekend as well as this one. I haven't decided which one(s). But that's the goal.

Jet hated to admit it, but he was impressed. Damn it. The noble’s home was huge. It was bigger than the Quon residence, which was saying something. Did these guys have any concept of how many families could live in this place comfortably with room to spare? Probably not.

He glanced back at the carriage behind him. The curtains had been drawn back so he could see in through the overly decorated carved wood. Seriously, who needed a transport to have so much detail? It was just supposed to take you from one place to another. Geez.

This was the only time he’d ever felt glad for that detail. He could see Shanyuan lying between Jin, Li, and Noble. What was her name again? Whatever. Not important. Shanyuan was a bit too still for Jet’s comfort.

“How’s he holding up?” he called back to his friends.

“Li had to wake him up again,” Jin called back.

Jet muttered a dirty curse and snapped the reins of the ostrich-horse. They had to get to the southeastern wall of Noble’s residence where the front door was. The ride here felt like it took forever, even though it probably didn’t. They had made good time. He just wished they could go faster. But Li had been adamant that they couldn’t jostle Shanyuan too much or risk aggravating the Dai Li’s injuries.

They finally rounded the last corner and Jet saw the door. “Ho the house!” he shouted to the guards he couldn’t see but knew were hiding behind those thick walls. “Open up! We got injured.”

“They won’t listen to you,” Noble said. “Guard, open the door and inform the healer we have a patient who requires immediate medical attention.”

Jet spat on the stone street and pulled the ostrich-horse up short. Hopping down off the driver’s
seat, he ran to the back of the carriage and yanked the curtains aside. Li scooted out of the carriage first, landing lightly on the ground and moving to stand next to Jet.

“Jin, can you help ease him out for me?” Li asked, his entire body twitching with nervous energy.

Zenko sat in the back of the dark carriage, her sightless eyes studying their every move. Jet couldn’t hear her thoughts, but he could tell she wasn’t thinking this would work out too well. At least Noble hadn’t argued when the Spirit joined them. If you could call staring hard and studiously not making a single sound for the first few minutes of the ride not arguing.

“Together,” Noble said to Jin, gripping Li’s jacket still slung under Shanyuan’s body with both hands.

Jin nodded and together they worked Shanyuan’s body out of the carriage and into Jet and Li’s waiting arms. Jin scrambled out after them, holding the young Dai Li’s head even with his body so it didn’t hang limply. Noble came out last with more grace than anyone else but with the same speed. How did she do that?

Zenko stepped onto Jin’s shoulders and kept her silence. Maybe it was the silence that bothered Jet. The fox Spirit had been whining softly most of the ride here. But now she sat there quietly, eyes closed, tails still. Jet studied her through narrowed eyes, flicking his gaze to Li searching for any sign the other boy knew what the fox Spirit was thinking. Baby sparrowhawk eyes flashed to his and Jet decided against asking. Everything he needed, he got from that one look.

Li was scared.

Jet kept his mouth shut and helped Li carry Shanyuan into the residence complex. Noble held the door open for them. The next few minutes were a flurry of unfamiliar voices, unfamiliar faces, and non-stop questions. It felt familiar, despite the unfamiliarity. …Did that even make sense?

“Thank you.”

Startled, Jet looked up from the futon where Shanyuan lay under the experienced gaze of Noble’s healer. Li wasn’t talking to him, as it turned out. The boy was bowing respectfully to the noble girl whose name Jet still couldn’t remember her ever saying.

“Don’t thank me,” Noble said, holding herself upright, her back straight and her head held high as she studied Li through unfeeling eyes. “This is advantageous for all of us.” She glanced at Jet briefly before her gaze dropped back down to Shanyuan. “My guard will guide the other Dai Li back here when he’s finished dealing with my be-” She cleared her throat and returned her sharp gaze to Li. “With Hongqi,” she finished. “By doing this, it puts the Dai Li in my family’s debt and boosts my family’s place in the Grand Secretariat’s list.”

Li frowned but nodded. “Qiao,” he said suddenly before she could turn away.

Since when did Li learn Noble’s name?

Noble lifted her light brown eyes to the waiter, surprisingly patient. For a noble, anyway.

Li tucked his hands in his sleeves and simply gazed at Noble with calm clarity. “If I find out you caused Shanyuan or his Master more harm than what has already been done to them,” Fire Nation gold blinked leisurely, “I’ll make sure you regret it.”

Noble narrowed her eyes in suspicion, but Li held her gaze without flinching. Was it just Jet, or was the room just a bit warmer than it had been when they arrived? Jet straightened and flicked his
gaze between Noble and Li, fingering the hilts of his hook swords. The hairs on the back of his neck and along his arms stood on end. He was half tempted to look for Zenko to see if her eyes were open, but something told him this feeling wasn’t caused by the wily fox Spirit.

Well, well.

When Li did finally look away, Noble had to blink and gather her wits about her once more. Her feathers were obviously ruffled, but she managed a polite nod before turning to keep an eye on the patient and healer. Jin, who had been watching them from her spot by Shanyuan’s side this entire time, glanced at Jet suspiciously, silently demanding an answer. Jet didn’t really have one and was surprisingly fine with that.

That had been impressive, and *damn* sexy. Jet winked at Jin and deliberately licked his lips. Jin huffed and rolled her eyes at his obnoxious attitude. Good.

“Where’re you planning on going, Li?” Jet asked, keeping his voice down as he stepped between Jin and Li.

The firebender hesitated, his eyes shining with defiant determination in his shy face. If Jet didn’t know better, he would have thought Li had been caught snitching a sweet treat from the treat jar. Too bad this was a bit more serious than that.

“Li?” Jet pressed, lifting both of his eyebrows and waiting expectantly.

But, as usual, Li was too freaking patient for his own good. Even under Jet’s unwavering gaze, the firebender didn’t give in. Jet shrugged. Alright. Not a problem. He knew Li’s weakness and absolutely *enjoyed* taking advantage of it.

Slowly, making sure Li had enough time to see and comprehend *exactly* what he was doing, Jet leaned into his boyfriend’s personal space, taking care to brush his lips against the waiter’s cheek. He could feel Li’s throat move as he swallowed back the desire to give in. Jet breathed right by Li’s unscarred ear, enjoying the way his boyfriend’s breathing stuttered unevenly.

“You know,” Jet whispered, his lips teasing the soft flesh of Li’s ear with each word, “you will give in.” Li gulped, but he didn’t move away or closer. “I bet you think you can just wait until our backs are turned and slip out like a spirit,” Jet continued, “and you’re probably right.” It was true. Jet didn’t doubt Li’s ability to move silently. “But you aren’t going *anywhere*,” he wrapped his fingers around his boyfriend’s upper arm, “without me.”

Leaning back just far enough to see Li’s face, Jet waited. Both golden eyes were locked on the wounded Dai Li on the healer’s futon and, if it hadn’t been for the faintest hint of a blush on those too pale cheeks, Jet would have doubted Li had even heard him. But there was a sharper edge to those baby sparrowhawk eyes that hadn’t been there since Li faced off with the Kuchisake-onna with knives of fire. It was dangerous and made every alarm in Jet’s well-honed instincts scream at him to *fight*.

Fire Nation. Destroy them. Li was Fire Nation. He was a *firebender*. Oma and Shu, if Katara and Toph were to be believed, Li was the Spirits-damned prince of the Fire Nation. He *was* Fire. He was *dangerous*.

Yet, despite all of that, Jet could still see Li through the emerging sharp edges of the Fire Prince. That was what stayed his hand. Then Fire Nation gold met Jet’s Earth Kingdom brown and Jet saw the vulnerability there, the fear that Li wouldn’t speak of.
“You’re going to see the Kuchisake-onna,” Jet murmured in disbelief.

It was ridiculous and just the type of crazy thing he expected Li to pull. Was this what Smellerbee and Longshot felt every time Jet suggested one of his cock-hogged plans like blowing up a dam to drown a whole village? Yeah. Jet owed them both an apology.

“I’m coming with you.”

Li tilted his head but didn’t argue. Instead, he heaved a deep sigh, his shoulders rising and falling. “Of course you are,” he murmured in resignation.

Nodding, Jet straightened and squeezed his boyfriend’s arm, rubbing his thumb over the fabric of his sleeve. “Why don’t you want to wait for Tengfei?” he asked. “We could use his help.”

“He’ll try to stop me. Besides,” Li said, his gaze softening as he watched Shanyuan, “he’ll be needed here. We should still have an hour before curfew. We’ll need to do this quickly.”

Jet mulled that over. “What does curfew have to do with this?” he asked with a frown. “The canal’s in the Middle Ring. We just have to find a hostel in the Middle Ring and we should be fine for one night. It’ll cost, but it shouldn’t be too much. We’ll just have to be careful which district we stay in, that’s all.”

Li grimaced. Oh, Jet was not going to like this.

“She wants to see her children.”

Fuck. Yeah, Jet hated this. “She’s dead,” he said coldly. “She can wait one more day. It’s getting late and unless you’re a Dai Li, a City Guard, a healer, or a licensed messenger, you can’t travel through Ba Sing Se after curfew without getting stopped and questioned. Or worse. Neither of us are any of those professions. If that ghost really did grow up here, then she knows that. She can fucking wait.”

“She can,” Li said, his chin dipping grimly. “She won’t.”

Fabulous. “Alright. Then we should go now while everyone’s distracted.”

Li’s eyes slid to Jin. “Not everyone,” he whispered.

“Jin doesn’t count,” Jet said, rubbing Li’s arm with his thumb once more. “She’s much more astute than she lets on.”

That was a smile. A tiny one, but it was one.

“Astute,” Li drawled, a playful spark glinting in molten gold. “That’s a big word, Jet.”

Oh-ho? Teasing are we? Jet grinned. “I’m a big boy. And as soon as this is all over and we’ve all had a day or two to rest, I’ll show you just how big.” he crowded close enough to his boyfriend that one of his legs had to step between Li’s, just a bit, “of a boy I really am.”

The smile vanished, replaced by a bashful blush and a very wide golden eye.

Victory.
Long Feng would not be pleased. Neither would Agent Aiguo. Pity. Tengfei couldn’t bring himself to give a single care about how the higher-ups would feel. He had somehow found the strength to keep from landing the final blow. Perhaps it was the look on Hongqi’s mother’s face when she appeared a couple seconds after the murderer finally went down and stayed down. Perhaps it was the realization that Tengfei hadn’t seen hide nor tail of anyone from their little strike team, that Knowledge Seeker included. Or perhaps it was the unwavering knowledge that Long Feng would enjoy making Hongqi suffer for hurting the Dai Li more than Tengfei would.

Most likely, it was a combination of all of the above as well as a few other reasons Tengfei hadn’t thought of yet. Whatever the reason, Tengfei was now in the process of dragging a very unconscious and bleeding Hongqi to the closest Dai Li substation in the Upper Ring. Any Dai Li manning the substation would take Hongqi off Tengfei’s hands and keep him incarcerated until Long Feng or a higher ranked Dai Li agent could deal with him.

There weren’t many substations in the Upper Ring simply because it wasn’t as large or as populated as the other Rings. With the Earth King’s palace in the center of the Upper Ring and every residence and business in relative close proximity to it, it made more sense to utilize the palace as the central substation for the Upper Ring. The handful of others weren’t used as often but they were always manned. Especially now that the Avatar was living in the Upper Ring.

“Please,” the lady of the residence pleaded. “Please! He’s my son!”

Tengfei stamped the ground and a wall of stone slammed into place separating him and his prisoner from Lord Quon and Lady Chunhua who were still pleading for him to release their son. He didn’t care what they said. He was too far past caring for anything at the moment. So when he hauled the unconscious criminal bound by his earthbent rock gloves out of the complex and saw a guard standing there, he took one look at the man before dismissing him.

The guard was an older man with salt and pepper hair and a beard he should be proud of. Unfortunately, he looked more like a man being led to prison than an Upper Ring guard. The man swallowed nervously before approaching Tengfei.

“Sir,” the man said hesitantly.

Sharp green eyes glared at the guard making him pause before squaring his shoulders and bowing respectfully. Startled by the show of difference, the Dai Li stopped and considered the guard thoughtfully. Footsteps patted the ground behind him, so he took his stance and thrust both arms upwards, earthbending another wall into place where the Quon residence’s entrance had been.

The guard glanced warily at the sealed complex, gulped, then looked back at the stern Dai Li. “I mean no disrespect,” he said, tilting his head slightly. “But are you Agent Tengfei?”

“I am,” he replied in a calm, measured voice.

That seemed to make the guard relax a little bit. “I was commanded by my Lady to give you a message regarding a Dai Li by the name of Shanyuan.”

Fascinating. Tengfei dropped Hongqi abruptly to the ground, shifting one of his feet and thrusting one of his arms in a swift uppercut. Rock rose up and encased Hongqi’s body from ankle to shoulder in a blanket of earth a thumb’s width thick all the way around. His jade green eyes flashed in the light of the distant fireworks still filling the night sky with color and sound.

“Talk,” he commanded.
The guard straightened. “Shanyuan has been taken to my Lady’s residence for emergency treatment,” he reported. “I was commanded to guide you there as soon as you finished your,” dark eyes flickered uncertainly to Hongqi’s unmov ing, earthbound body, “business.”

“What house is your Lady a member of?” Tengfei said sternly, narrowing his gaze dangerously.

“The House of Yan.”

An old name. Their political fingers were in several departments of the Ba Sing Se government but they were prominently involved in the Treasury Department. The Dai Li were aware of them, had watched them on multiple occasions. But the family stayed out of the bigger political movements, choosing to remain conservative and hold their own counsel in regards to anything... unseemly. Wise family.

“Why would the House of Yan involve themselves in Dai Li business?” Tengfei asked, noticeably tucking his hands into his sleeves so his fingers brushed cool iron.

“My Lady offered aid,” the guard explained. “One of your informants,” -what- “requested she leave the premises to avoid Dai Li attention. In return for helping her, my Lady offered aid.”

Ah. Balancing debts. And with the Dai Li. Clever girl.

“These informants,” Tengfei said, “how many were there?”

“Three that I saw,” the guard replied readily. “Four if you count the... coyote-fox.”

Ah. Well done.

Satisfied, Tengfei regarded the still unconscious Hongqi impassively before coming to a decision. “I have received your report,” he declared. “Return to your Lady. I have some business to take care of before I join you.” He bowed politely, just deep enough to be respectful but shallow enough to maintain his high position, before standing tall once more. “Shanyuan’s injuries,” he continued, forcing back his fear of the answer, “were they severe?”

The guard grimaced and Tengfei had his answer.

“Is the Yan family’s healer a waterbender?” he asked.

“No,” the guard replied, shaking his head. “She isn’t.”

Not good enough then.

“I will endeavor to find a waterbending healer to assist her then,” Tengfei said. “Return to your post.”

“Sir,” the guard said, bowing and rushing away from the Dai Li just slow enough to not be seen as disrespectful.

Tengfei hated this. Shanyuan was his Apprentice. He needed to be by his Apprentice’s side. Shanyuan was Tengfei’s responsibility and he had been seriously injured. He may be a Master Dai Li but he would never get used to informing parents they would never see their precious child again. Once was too often.

But first, he had to get rid of a certain piece of trash. Rooting his stance, he flipped his hands and the stone slab they stood on flipped over.
“Back so soon?”

“I’ve completed my end of the deal.”

“Lies, child of Fire?”

“Your words were to ‘burn him to ashes.’ I followed your orders to the letter. Any records of your betrayer have been destroyed. The one formerly called Hongqi no longer exists. He is currently in Dai Li custody.”

“My orders were to burn him alive.”

“I did. A nameless man lives. If he continues to live, which is questionable considering the wound he inflicted on a Dai Li agent, then I doubt he will maintain any autonomy of self.”

“My orders were to burn him alive.”

“I did burn him alive. I burned all records of him and left him alive. You seek the death of your betrayer. You’re weak.”

“You dare!”

“Death is quick, temporary, pain that doesn’t last. If you truly hate someone, if you truly wish with your entire being for someone to suffer, to pay for what they did to you, then you don’t kill them. You make them live. You make them suffer. You make them pay. They can’t do any of that if they’re dead. So don’t kill them. End them.”

“…such hatred… You burn, child of Fire.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“My children.”

“What about them?”

“Take me to them.”

“Who’s asking? The Woman in White or the Kuchisake-onna?”

“Neither. A mother is asking.”
Li pressed a hand against the full leather canteen stuffed into his belt. He still felt guilty about swiping it off that man, but he needed it. The Kuchisake-onna traveled through the canal water. Unfortunately, the canal didn’t feed the well near the potter’s complex and they wouldn’t have time to go to the restaurant district first. So he had to fill the canteen with water directly from the canal.

The run to the train station had resulted in gasping breaths and twinging ribs. But they made it. There was no going back now. Jin and Shanyuan were on their own. Once this train emptied of the last passengers, it would be reduced to one car and be closed to the general public. Only anyone on the designated list of acceptable professions with the required documentation would be allowed to board the train after curfew. Emergencies happened day or night, after all.

Fingers slipped around his arm just below his shoulder, squeezing and rubbing a thumb gently in soothing motions. Strange how something so simple could calm his frantic heartbeat from a hummingbird-of-paradise’s wingbeats to a signal drum pounding out the command to attack.

...he really didn’t want to know how he knew that.

Soft leather met the pads of his twitching fingers once more and he breathed. In, hold, out. His nerves danced knowing he was literally carrying the essence of a murderous Spirit to what he had come to see as his home. Ying and Than wouldn’t be there. At least he hoped they wouldn’t be there.

It was very late and it wouldn’t do to keep Hope up. If Ying planned on getting any sleep tonight, she would need to put Hope to bed. Than was never far from Ying’s side. If Agni was feeling merciful, then Ying and Than would be back at their shared apartment.

Cheng would still be at the potter’s complex since he lived and worked there. Li didn’t want to break in if he didn’t have to. Cheng may let him stay the night if he came up with some excuse and with curfew so close…

“Stop it.”

Startled, Li turned to the person standing next to him. Dark brown eyes the exact shade of walnut-almonds regarded him with calm support.
“You’re overthinking again,” Jet continued, squeezing Li’s arm comforting. “If all you do is brood and fret, you’ll drive yourself to an early grave.”

Huffing, Li felt his lips twitch upwards at the corners. But before he could formulate a reply, the train began slowing down as it pulled into the last train station. Everyone still on board would have to disembark here. Heaving a deep breath, Li rested a hand on Jet’s arm and stood from the bench, moving towards the doors.

The cool night air was refreshing and stark compared to the hot anxiety devouring his self-control. Fur rubbed up against his ankle and he lowered his arms so Zenko could hop into his grasp. Claws caught on the fabric of his clothes as the fox Spirit pulled herself up from Li’s arms to settle comfortably on his shoulders. Her chin rested on her paws while her three tails wrapped reassuringly around Li’s vulnerable throat.

Jet slid his hand down Li’s arm to his hand, entwining their fingers together. Warmth seeped into Li’s palm through the contact. Without consciously thinking about it, he tightened his hold on Jet’s hand as they walked. He saw Jet glance at him in concern through the corner of his good eye but couldn’t bring himself to meet that gaze.

They walked in silence through the still streets lit only by a handful of green crystal lamps that were few and far between. The moon was a thin sliver in the partly cloudy sky, easily missed in the dark shadows cast by the tall, clustered buildings and the dim green lamplight.

More than once, Li caught the faintest hint of motion on a rooftop nearby but no one accosted them, demanding papers or worse. So he breathed, muttered a soft prayer to Agni, and gripped Jet’s hand and Zenko’s tails. Fear prickled up his spine and slithered across his skin leaving sensitive goose-pig flesh behind. Every hair on the back of his neck and along his arms was standing on end.

The fox Spirit’s eyes were closed. He knew that. This fear was tantalizing, unsettling, and foreign in a way Zenko’s Spirit presence was not. Li suspected this uneasy agitation that made him hyper aware of every shadow, every pinprick of touch, every breath that roared loudly in his ears, and every thump of his heartbeat was not from Zenko.

Without meaning to, his gaze dropped to the innocuous canteen bouncing against his hip. The Kuchisake-onna was there. This dreadful trepidation was from the murderous Spirit who was separated from physical contact by a thin layer of cloth and leather. Not much.

“Almost there.”

Li mentally latched onto Jet’s voice, using it to drag himself out of the growing spring of fear welling from the Spiritually contaminated water in his canteen. Fur brushed his cheek and a sandpaper tongue licked his jaw. He wasn’t alone in this. Zenko was here. Jet was here. They stayed with him even though they didn’t have to.

Jet’s thumb stroked his, the rough calluses of a swordsman massaging Li’s skin. Jet had been right. If Li had attempted this on his own, it was unlikely he would have made it this far without collapsing into a panic attack from the base, instinctual fear gnawing his mind and senses raw. He felt hunted, stalked, watched, paranoid.

He felt like prey.

This was a bad idea.

Agni. Please.
“We’re here.”

Oh, thank Agni.

Li blinked back into focus and lifted his gaze from the stone and dirt street to the earthen building rising in front of him. The potter’s complex was silent and mostly dark. A few windows on the second floor where the residences were still glowed gold from lit candles, but not many. Every window on the first floor was closed and shuttered and the front door was locked.

It was locked.

Despair. Heavy, cloying, smothering like oil in his lungs. He couldn’t get in. He couldn’t breathe. The hopelessness weighed him down until earth met his knees. His heart struggled to beat passed the misery pressing against it. He had failed. There was nothing left. Rejected. Alone. Wretched. There was nothing.

Nothing.

“Li! Snap out of it!”

Brown. Messy hair. Sunkissed skin. A face that looked too serious without a straw poking out from between chapped lips.

“Jet.”

Relief flooded Jet’s face a second before Li found himself surrounded by warm arms, a sturdy chest, and hot breath on his neck.

“We’ll get in,” Jet murmured right by Li’s ear. “We’ll get in, I promise. Listen to me, Li. Do not let her win this. You’re doing her a favor. If she wants you to actually fulfill that,” the embrace tightened until it was almost painful, “then tell that bitch to back the fuck off.”

Fury!

Confusion?

The despair that had threatened to crush him to oblivion retreated back into the Spiritually contaminated water leaving Li gasping and confused. He hadn’t meant to let his self-control slip so badly. He was supposed to keep his sense of self separate. How had he let her worm her way past his defenses without him even realizing she was the culprit? And so quickly...

Hesitantly, he lifted his arms and clutched handfuls of Jet’s shirt in his fists. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t mean to-”

“Not your fault,” Jet said, cutting him off. He sat back just enough to let his forehead rest against Li’s and sighed. “You held on as long as you could. I’m not going to let you fall.”

A warbling call startled a shy smile from Li and a cheeky grin from Jet.

“And neither will she,” Jet added, jerking his chin towards the fox Spirit pushing between them so she could lick the underside of Li’s chin. “She noticed you slipping before I did. She tried to pull you back but you wouldn’t respond.” A hand cupped Li’s cheek, brushing aside the black bangs dangling over his eyes and Jet’s grin softened. “That’s my job. To pull you back before you slip too far under.”
The warmth was back, a living heat that pulsed with the beat of a heart. Fire. Jet’s Fire. It wasn’t the Fire intrinsic to a firebender or anyone from the Fire Nation, but it was burning there nonetheless.

Agni’s gift to Humans, the Fire of life.

Li glanced at Zenko who nuzzled him, flicking his cheek with her ear before hopping out of his lap and waiting for them on the dirt street next to him. Jet started to sit back, putting distance between them.

Agni, why the hell not?

Before he had the chance to second guess his actions or blush from the very thought of what he about to do, Li reached out, grabbed a handful of Jet’s shirt, and yanking him back into range. A soft gasp that was almost a word escaped Jet’s mouth before it was smothered by Li’s lips. The kiss wasn’t as long or as deep as Li wished it could be, but it was as much as either of them could manage at the moment. It was enough.

The feel of his lips gliding over Jet’s made his heart flutter and grounded his mind and sense of self in the here and now where they belonged. However brief the contact, it was still everything Li could ever want and more than he could ever imagine.

And now he was definitely blushing. Abashed, he leaned back and swallowed thickly, stubbornly refusing to break eye contact with Jet. He wasn’t sure where he had found the strength to do that just now, but he didn’t regret it. He was thoroughly mortified by it, yes, absolutely; but he didn’t regret it.

Jet, however, hadn’t moved since Li broke the kiss. He was still staring at him with a stunned expression on his face. Then a grin that held hundreds of indecent implications worked its way onto Jet’s face accompanied by a deep-throated snicker that made Li shiver.

“Now that,” Jet purred, trailing a teasing finger suggestively along Li’s jawline, “was more like it.”

Then the touch was gone and Jet was sauntering over to the main door of the potter’s complex. Breathe Li. In, oh Agni he felt warm, hold, he should probably stand now, out, he could feel his cheeks burning. And Zenko was laughing at him again.

Fighting back his blush, Li got to his feet and-

“You said the guy in charge is called Cheng, right?” Jet asked suddenly.

“Uh, yes,” Li said, tilting his head curiously. “What does that have to do with opening the-”

“Hey Cheng!” Jet shouted into the quiet night, startling a few pigeon-doves into flight. “Open the fucking door!”

Stunned, Li dove for his boyfriend and tried to pull him back. “No, wait. What are you doing? Jet! Stop!” he cried as quietly as he could and still get Jet’s attention.

“Relax, Li. I got this,” Jet said, flashing him a smirk and shaking off Li’s attempts to silence him. Tilting his head back far enough to look at the dark window directly above the door, Jet shouted, “Come on Cheng. I’ve got a friend here who really doesn’t want to sleep out on the street and a nasty bitch with the temper of a sea serpent who wants to see her kids.”
Humiliated, Li dropped his head into his hands and just breathed. He ignored Zenko’s playful nudges against his ankle. He could hear her laughing at him and he really wasn’t in the mood to deal with that on top of this insanity.

“Look, Cheng,” Jet said, just as loudly. “Quite frankly, your door is wood and I highly doubt it’ll withstand a good strong kick to just the right place.”

“Oh Agni, why me,” Li groaned under his breath.

“And to be honest,” Jet added, smirking and patting Li’s hair in amusement, “I’m more afraid of the bitch than anything you or the you-know-who could possibly come up with to stop me.”

“Will you keep your voice down, you shameless brat?” someone shouted from a nearby building.

“Yeah,” Jet replied without bothering to turn around and visually acknowledge the person. “As soon as Cheng lets me in.”

“Oma and Shu have mercy.”

“You see, Cheng,” Jet shouted. “That bitch? She’s a mom. Moms are terrifying. This mom? She just lost her kids. They were murdered. Two words. Kiln. Children.”

The silence that followed was heavy. Even the annoyed stranger made no audible sound of relief.

A soft click followed by the sound of wood rubbing against wood, and the door opened. The man who appeared from the dark interior was grim and unimpressed. His black braid was a bit loose from a long day’s work and he had clearly dressed in a hurry. Dark eyes glared out at Jet briefly before settling on Li.

“You are either a very bad liar,” he said, returning his angry gaze to Jet who remained unruffled, “or you’re drunk and need to spend the night with the Guard.”

Jet snorted. “I’m neither. But I am running low on pati-”

“We need to get in, sir,” Li said, moving so he stood between a very disgruntled Master Potter and his boyfriend who seemed dead set on trying said Master Potter’s patience. “Please. It’s important. She won’t wait much longer.”

Cheng straightened, regarding Li with appraising eyes before sweeping the very empty street behind them. “I still don’t see this woman you’re referring to.”

“That’s a good thing,” Jet muttered.

“What Jet means,” Li said over his boyfriend’s frustrated muttering, “is that it’s a good thing you can’t see her. It means she’s willing to wait a bit longer.” Cheng’s wise eyes studied him closely. “Master, please. Just let us in. You can stay and watch, if you want. Just let us get this over with before she decides not to wait and takes matters into her own hands.”

The guildmaster’s son hesitated, his dark brown almost black eyes lifting to Jet still standing behind Li. A high pitched bark jerked Cheng’s gaze down to the fox Spirit at Li’s feet. Zenko must have done something, because the Master Potter finally sighed and stepped back holding the door open for them.
“Thank you,” Li said, bowing before hurrying inside, Jet and Zenko on his heels.

Without waiting for Cheng to finish closing and bolting the door, Li made his way through the abandoned workshop area to the courtyard and the kilns. This time he was aware of the Spirit’s influence creeping through him, filling him with a hope and urgency that were not all his own.

“What is going on?” he heard Cheng demand.

The peep holes of the active kilns glowed red hot. All but the last kiln in the row. It was silent and dark. The stone that had sealed it shut only a day ago was gone as was the door. Secretly, Li doubted this kiln would ever be used again.

Jet sighed heavily. “Trust me,” he said. “It’s best if you don’t know.”

The single green crystal lamp dimly illuminated the courtyard, casting long eerie shadows that stretched their oily fingers across the grass and earth. The bald rock of the low wall surrounding the kilns shone in the green light. The bare earth beyond the wall was covered in shadow. The gaping darkness within the kiln proper was almost solid in its thick, impenetrability.

“This is my complex, boy,” Change said sternly. “Everything that goes on here is my responsibility.”

At the base of the dead kiln, barely visible in the uncertain light, were a handful of tufts of grass grown tall and wild. Here they thrived despite the intense heat a mere stone’s thickness away from them. No wind disturbed this place. Nothing moved, nothing breathed, nothing lived.

Something flickered feebly.

“They’re still here,” Li whispered in awful wonder.

He couldn’t face them before. The memory of their bodies, scorched beyond recognition and contorted from intense, heat-fueled agony, would be forever branded in his mind. He wasn’t sure if he could face them now.

But she needed him to.

Crouching in the break in the wall, Li tugged his borrowed canteen from his belt and uncorked it. Honestly, he wasn’t sure what to do from here. Soft fur brushed his side and he knew. Fire was life. Fire gave life and Fire could take life. Fire had already taken life here. Now, his Fire had to give life.

The ground was still warm from the sunlight a few hours ago. It wasn’t as warm as Li would have preferred, but he could work with it. Easing himself down to a kneeling position, he placed his free hand on the ground, palm down and fingers spread, and closed his eyes.


The deeper his chi reached into the earth, following the strands of heat, the cooler it got until, finally, his chi could reach no further. Curling his hand as if to scoop up a handful of dirt, Li drew the strands of lingering heat up to the surface, pooling it in his palm. Fires that were not Fire fluttered somewhere behind him, dim and dull compared to his own blazing Fire.

Is this what Zenko meant? This Fire… It was his. He knew it was his. It was bright and red-gold and it burned, unquenched by the cool darkness surrounding it. This was his Fire.
It took a bit more care to siphon off some of his own fire into his palm as well. Instinct wanted him to coil his chi in the palm of his hand and breathe, mixing air and fuel with the spark of his chi to ignite a flame. But he could not. That wasn’t his goal.

This purpose was more subtle. It was not the first time he had done this. Though granted, he had been in a life or death situation then. Had that really been just this morning?

He could feel the heat gathering in his cupped hand, held prisoner by his curled fingers. The ground burned, the air vibrated intensely, and still he withheld the necessary spark. He didn’t need flame, he needed the _heat._

With the utmost care, Li lifted his hand and pulled the condensed heat with it. A soft tinkle and low gasps were just barely audible to his ears, but he ignored them. Heat. He needed more heat.

Opening his eyes, he moved his clawed fingers slowly, compressing the heated air until it glowed dully. Something began dancing underneath his skin, tingling like an oncoming storm but without the brilliance or the noise. It made him itch with energy and only got more intense the more he compressed the heat in his grasp.

Lifting the uncorked canteen, he moved it closer to the compressed, faintly glowing heat. This had to work. Agni, please work. He plunged the heat into the canteen and flash evaporated all of the water into a cloud of steam that poured out of the thoroughly scorched canteen and coalesced into a woman in white.

_“My children.”_
Chapter Summary

In which a mother finally reunites with her children, a heart begins to break, and sometimes truth is worse than fiction.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for the delay. There probably won't be another update for a couple days due to thesis work. But I figured this should tide y'all over until then. ^_^~

This wasn't… This shouldn't be possible.

Yet he couldn't deny that the boy Li, who Cheng knew to be a firebender, had just made ice. Just like he had cooled the murderous kiln the other day fast enough to cause thermal shock. Tiny, delicate ice crystals shimmering iridescently in the jade lamplight covered the earth where Li's hand had been. Li was a firebender.

A firebender who could make ice.

And that glow… The swirling, glowing orb of something imprisoned in Li's hand was like nothing Cheng had ever seen. It was like nothing he had ever even heard of. It glimmered almost silvery in the darkness like a flame, but not. Fire flickered, but everyone knew fire burned upwards. This glowing orb swirled in a pattern Cheng had only ever seen when a waterbender bent a thread of water from a pond.

It wasn't natural.

Then the fog that should have faded away in the still air coalesced into the faint form of a woman. Spirits above, what had he stumbled into? The woman he saw standing in his courtyard, and who had not been there mere seconds ago, faded in and out of his vision. Her form flickering in the moving cloud of steam.

Cheng knew about ghosts and Spirits. He was as Spiritual as the next man, all things considered. He regularly submitted personal prayer requests to the local shrine to Oma and Shu. Still, knowing ghosts and Spirits were real was one thing. Actually seeing and believing they were real… That was a totally different game altogether.

Cheng couldn't be sure whether the woman was a ghost or a Spirit. However, the way his nerves sang and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end hinted at the woman being a Spirit. A Spirit was in his home.

And Li brought her here.

This was Cheng's home. This was his guild's home. His own father was bedridden from illness in a
second floor apartment with a window just a stone's throw away overlooking the courtyard. Many windows overlooked the courtyard. Anyone could look out and see what was happening here. Anyone could breathe the wrong words to the wrong ears and green uniforms would converge on this place once more. Cheng had no desire for that to happen.

Ghosts and Spirits were the be revered and respected and, most importantly, left alone. To raise a ghost from the grave without the proper protections in place was bad enough. To call on a Spirit here where there were children-

"Don't," the loud mouthed brat who had accompanied Li into his home commanded, an arm raised to prevent Cheng from approaching Li. Who did this young boy think he was to command the son of the Potter Guildmaster?

"I'm serious," the boy hissed viciously. "Don't. She will kill you."

"And you two brought her in here?" Cheng snapped back angrily.

The boy -what was his name- hesitated, licking his lips nervously, but did not move from his position or lower his arm. Brown eyes that gleamed unnaturally in the lamp's feeble green light lifted to Cheng's.

"She would have kept killing if we didn't do this," the young man said. There was no hesitancy in his voice. His mouth was set in a grim line darkened by shadows. "She just wants to see her children."

"Her chil…" Understanding weighed on his soul as his mind finally connected the pebbles and completed the picture. "Oma and Shu have mercy," he whispered, turning his wide-eyed gaze to the ghostly woman.

Her stark white dress was nicer than those typically seen in the Lower Ring. The air in the courtyard was still; there was no breeze to be felt. The heat from the three active kilns did nothing for the evening chill, if it was indeed an all natural chill. Cheng doubted that. Nevertheless, the skirt of the woman's dress rippled as if disturbed by an ethereal breeze.

Her hair was long and hung down her back like a river of ebony. A single hairpin was the only piece of jewelry she wore, the sheen of several small jade stones set in glittering gold sparkled in the viridescent lamplight. Cheng couldn't see her face but, for some reason he could not fully understand, he knew she was beautiful. He knew she was beautiful and yet she was not attractive to him in the slightest. It was an odd realization.

Why wasn't the mist dispersing? Was she holding it in place? Was she-

"My children."

Yu Huang, Great Spirit of the Steady Earth, give him strength.

__________________________________________________________________________________________

He really hoped Li knew what he was doing. At least Cheng was finally beginning to grasp the gravity of the situation. Cautiously, Jet lowered his arm preventing the man from approaching either Li or the Spirit bitch. Fingering the hilt of one of his hook swords, Jet took one step forward so he stood between Cheng and the bitch.

Li hadn't moved since he freed the Spirit from the confines of his small not-really-borrowed
canteen. Not since that firebending… Jet still felt fluttery inside from that.

He wouldn't lie to himself. He really had been afraid of Li for a second or two there. His mind knew this was Li, the tea shop waiter with the baby sparrowhawk eyes. But his gut screamed at him that this was Zuko, Prince of the Fire Nation, son of Fire Lord Ozai, a firebender. It was a disorienting emotional state to be in.

All his life, he only knew Fire could steal, harm, and kill. Seeing it with Li behind the flame -had that really been a flame just now?- was calming and… safe.

Damn it all.

Biting back the part of his brain that demanded he act, he forced himself to actually think. Li would never deliberately do something to hurt someone else if he could avoid it. Li wouldn't. But would Zuko?

Ah, fuck.

Swallowing his doubts and bolstering his resolve, Jet sighed and approached Li. The Spirit bitch didn't even look at him. She just stood there, eyes cast down at the ground by the base of the kiln. Gently, trying not to startle Li too badly, Jet rested his hand on his boyfriend's shoulder, squeezing it.

He felt Li's body jolt in surprise a split second before golden eyes darted up to his. Then Li covered Jet's hand with his own and got to his feet.

"Thanks," he whispered.

"Don't mention it," Jet replied in kind.

Li flashed him a small smile before returning his gaze to the bitch. A blur of copper and rusty black bounded up from the ground into Li's arms then up onto his shoulders, unearthly cobalt eyes open and staring. The fox Spirit made a soft warbling sound and Li tilted his head in reply to whatever she said.

"You have a choice, Spirit," Li said just loud enough to be heard by those present. Li waited until the bitch turned to face them, her eyes glowing the same haunting jade of the lamplight. Her scarlet lips parted just enough to reveal the faintest hint of the wound that had been dealt to her in life. Strange. Her wound wasn't as bloody as Jet remembered it. Instead, it seemed to fade into the deathly pale of her cheeks, vanishing like the mist she was made of.

"If you choose to remain a Kuchisake-onna," Li said, ignoring the breathless gasp from behind them, "then I will have no choice but to destroy you. I cannot let a monster near these children." Glowing eyes narrowed but Li forged on. "A Woman in White I might allow close enough to touch," he continued. "But I can only allow a mother to truly embrace them."

Silence fell as the Spirit pondered Li's words. Holding himself tall -well, as tall as he could anyway- Li tucked his hands into his sleeves and waited. The bitch glanced at Zenko and Jet, gauging their reactions, before turning her head back to the kiln.

Curious, Jet followed her gaze and, sure enough, flitting around the tall grass by the kiln's base were two, tiny pinpricks of light. Oma and Shu… He felt his heart plummet to his feet. Those tiny lights... They were so small, so vulnerable. They must have been so young, younger than the children of Jet's woodland home.
"Oh Spirits," he muttered under his breath.

The Spirit bitch said nothing, but Jet felt his unease ebb. It did not vanish, but it no longer nipped at his heart like a wild pygmy-puma. It was just an ambient emotion like what he often felt before he and his Freedom Fighters would raid Fire Nation troops. This, he could tolerate.

Under his hand, he could feel the tension melt from Li's shoulder. The tea waiter held himself straighter, the worry wrinkles at the corners of his one unscarred eye softening. Together, Li and Jet stood still and watched as the Spirit moved across the bare earth towards the tiny specks of light. Her feet were hidden by the long, gossamer fabric of her dress as she glided soundlessly over the dirt.

Just short of the broken stone that had once been used to seal her children to their fiery fates, she stopped and knelt. Her hands, long fingered and delicate, reached out to the two precious lights. She never tried to touch them, she just sat there and waited. Still. Silent. Patient.

After a few breathless moments, one of the little lights flit cautiously out of the tall grass towards one of the woman's pale fingers. It wove its way between her fingers, hovered just above the illusory skin until it finally settled in the center of her palm. The second hitodama followed, quicker than the first, dancing around the woman's palm as if in joy.

With the greatest care, the mother gently cupped the two little souls protectively with both hands and lifted them to her face. She leaned down until her vermilion lips were hidden by her hands. Her glistening eyes slipped shut as tears slid down her cheeks.

A soft sound, lilting and sad, drifted to their ears. There were words in the melody but they were too soft to make out clearly. It reminded Jet of something his mother once sang to him when he woke up during a thunderstorm with nightmares. Before he lost her. Before she died.

A lullaby.

---

Leaves from the vine

_Falling so slow_

_Like fragile, tiny shells_

_Drifting in the foam_

_Little soldier boy_

_Come marching home_

_Brave soldier boy_

_Comes marching home._

He didn't need to hear the words. He knew them. He _knew_ them. He could hear them in his memories. Someone he loved sang it as he wept. Someone important to him. Someone he _knew_...

Think, Li. _Think._

in amber eyes. An old man playing a tsungi horn. He knew that old man. It hurt seeing the old man's face but being unable to come up with a… name…

Lu Ten.

Breathe. The pain is old. It hurts but it will pass. He could hear laughter, see a smile, and he knew they were both for him. Lu Ten. Brother wasn't quite right, but it fit. So did death. Lu Ten was gone, dead. He went off to war with uncle and never came back.

Uncle. The old man with the smile and amber eyes and ginseng tea. He was Li's uncle. Uncle Mushi.

He had been so incredibly close to the truth and he'd had no idea. Mushi knew. He knew and he said nothing. Why? Had Li done something to push him away? Was Uncle mad at him? Why wouldn't he tell him who he was? Why would he…

It hurt. He could feel every beat of his heart like a fist pounding his chest. Every throb hurt. He had to think to breathe and he could barely manage that past the agony. His eyes burned, his throat was dry and sore from sobs that couldn't quite escape him. His vision blurred as tears brimmed his eyes. He wanted to cry. He just… couldn't.

"Li."

Jet.

"Li, you okay?"

No. No he was not okay. He felt like he was dying inside. His uncle had been right there and he hadn't known! How could he possibly be okay?

Fur nuzzled his scarred cheek and a wet, sandpaper tongue licked away the tears. Calm. Safe. The steady stream of thought from the kitsune helped soothe the frayed edges of his emotion. It helped but it didn't stop the flood of memories.

He remembered. Not everything. Not even close. But he remembered his family. He had family. He had an uncle.

Than. Ying.

He bit his lip. Could he have his Uncle Mushi and Uncle Than? Was he allowed to have both? He didn't want to lose what he had. He… He liked what he had. It wasn't much, but it was his. Wasn't it? Ying. Than. Little Hope. They were his too, right?

...right?

Jet's hand on his shoulder suddenly tightened and-

"Little firebird."

Startled, Li lifted his head -when had he looked down?- and found himself face to face with the Spirit's uncanny green eyes. Her hands were still cupped, holding her children's tiny souls close to her breast protectively. Her inhuman gaze softened to something tender and motherly.

...for him?

Transferring the two precious souls to one hand, she reached out with the other and trailed delicate
fingertips along the edge of Li's terrible scar.

"I did not lie, little firebird," she said, her voice sad and comforting. "You will never find peace so long as the one who did this lives."

Say something. Say something, Li.

"I… I don't remember them," he whispered, feeling the heartbreaking sorrow settle on his soul once more.

"You will," she murmured. Her eyes were so sad. "You will. And it will destroy you." She sighed and brushed his black bangs aside, revealing the full extent of the burn scar. "You truly are my perfect match."

He knew she was right. He knew it would steal everything from him, everything he had, everything he cared about, everything he loved. It would take Jet…

"Why?" he finally asked. "Why did you choose me?" He felt Zenko adjust her position on his shoulders so her tails brushed his neck. "You could have chosen… anyone. The Dai Li even. But you didn't. Why me?"

She tilted her head, regarding him thoughtfully. "You don't know?" she asked wonderingly. "The Dai Li serve Ba Sing Se. They are powerful and efficient, sages of the Earth Kingdom. But they are not the Avatar or of the Avatar's lineage."

She leaned close until her lips brushed Li's damaged ear, ignoring the kitsune's head just below her chin. The hand cradling her children's souls pressed against the burn scar over Li's heart. He couldn't hear her breathing. But he heard her words.

"Not like you. Farewell, my little Firebird. And thank you."

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Ba Sing Se was enormous, much larger than anything she could imagine. At least the train was familiar. Well, as familiar as anything here was. Green crystal lamps glowed dimly through the streets, fading to complete darkness as the night wore on. She could see the stars here.

Occasionally, a lone firework would shoot up from the Middle and Upper Rings into the darkness high above where it exploded in noise and color before fading back into nothing. How annoying. The brilliant colors filled the darkness with light and blotted out the stars.

The grate of stone against stone continued as she rode the late night train. Once she got to her temporary haven in the Middle Ring, she would finally allow herself to relax and sleep. It was boring right now, but at least she could learn things. It truly was amazing how much someone could learn just by studying what was around them at night.

For instance, over there was a nicer part of the Lower Ring. How did she know? The streetlamps were still lit. They were very dim, but they were lit. All of the areas surrounding that one section were lost to the darkness. Simple, diluted shapes rising out of the blackness like shadows cast on a cloudy day.

She sighed, her breath sounding loud to her ears. This place was huge and so jam packed with people it made her mind want to bleed out of her ears. How could anyone live in such a densely populated place? How did they sleep?
She could only imagine the horrors of sharing a wall with other people. She shared a wall with her kid brother back home. He had a pair of lungs to rival one of those ridiculously annoying catowls. Sharing four walls, a roof, and a floor with strangers?

No. Over her dead body.

She had no desire to stay in Ba Sing Se any longer than she absolutely had to. It was nice to look at, but that was about it.

…what was that?

Tilting her head curiously, she focused her attention on a rooftop not too far away from the elevated railway her train rode on. It was too dark to make any clear distinctions of color or exact shape, but since this was the Earth Kingdom capital, she'd settle for green and human respectively. Not that that answered any questions, but it did make her curious.

Who would be roof jumping at this hour? Everyone knew roof jumping was dangerous when the moon was dark or a sliver in the sky. They were efficient and knew what they were doing, whoever they were. They moved with the deadly grace of a warrior, never missing a step, no extra motions, and- oh! an earthbender.

Fascinating.

"See anything interesting, Mai?" one of her comrades asked.

The sudden sound of a human voice was unexpectedly loud in the heavy silence of the lone train car. Mai had to consciously remove her fingers from one of the tiny blades in her sleeve before she tried something she wouldn't live to regret.

"Maybe," she muttered in a bored, dry tone.

She remained perfectly still so the companion who spoke to her could lean over and follow her gaze out the window. Mai knew the moment golden eyes noticed the roof jumping shadow.

"Well, well," Fire Princess Azula murmured, a dangerous grin stretching across her lovely features. "Who knew the Earth Kingdom enjoyed heights so much?"

Mai sighed. So boring.
Here and Now

Chapter Summary

In which Li trusts Jet to hold him firmly in the here and now.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I have been housesitting 3 dogs, 2 turtles, and a fish for the past week. That, plus everything else made it near impossible to post this. Sorry.

That said, this story is now officially changing its rating from T to E. Was that hint blatant enough for y'all?

He didn’t know what the Spirit lady said to Li, but whatever it was… The bitch was damn lucky she vanished when she had. Li hadn’t spoken a word since and only moved when prodded. Jet got one good look at Li’s eyes and knew nothing he said would make it through to him. Not yet anyway.

So he spent his time herding Li away from the kiln where the children were murdered and towards the buildings. Cheng was making himself useful and clearing out a place for them to sleep. The complex itself was full but there were a couple spare one room units available for visiting potters fresh off the ferry or moving from one quadrant of Ba Sing Se to another. One of them was currently occupied, the other was being used for storage.

Jet didn’t give a damn. It was only for one night. He preferred his own bed, yes, obviously. But he had a strong self-preservation instinct that demanded he stay off the street now that it was after curfew. There was no way he would be able to sneak Li out in his condition. Not without being caught.

Still, seeing Li like this… It hurt him in a way he couldn’t fully explain. Li showed what he felt. Li was vulnerable in so many ways. He could also kill Jet in six hundred twenty-three different ways too, most likely. But he didn’t act like it.

All it took was a well-timed innuendo or, better yet, a surprise kiss and Li fell apart at the seams. In a good way. The only good way. This… This was not okay.

Judging from a certain not-fox’s raised hackles, Jet was willing to bet Zenko didn’t like this either. The fox Spirit had been strangely subdued since the bitch Spirit vanished and hadn’t moved from her protective curl around Li’s neck. Jet might not be able to understand Zenko as long as her eyes were closed, but there was no way he could miss her soft whines and flattened ears.

It irked him to see both Li and Zenko be so passive. They were never passive. They were never listless. They were never-

“In here.”
Jet lifted his gaze from Li’s placid expression to the small room Cheng gestured to. The wooden door hung open revealing a small, narrow space filled almost entirely by boxes, blankets, and pottery pieces. The shutter for the lone window was shut and latched so only the faintest hint of green light from the streetlamp outside filtered in through the edges and cracks.

“Feel free to use a couple blankets and pillows if you can find them,” Cheng said, stepping aside so the two boys could go in. “I know it’s a tight fit, but it’s all we have. Try not to break any of the pottery, if possible.”

Jet glowered at the man, sniffing before trudging inside. He had to tug Li’s hand otherwise the boy would have stayed in the hallway. This was stupid. Jet needed to address this situation properly.

“Does his family know he’s here?” the guildmaster’s son asked, his gruff voice softened by worry. Damn. That’s right. Li had a family.

“I doubt it,” Jet admitted. Oh. Damn. Li had a job. “I don’t think he’s had the chance to tell anyone where he’s been since this morning.”

Cheng straightened, furrowing his brow in surprise. “How is that possible?” he gasped.

“Long story. Short version?” Jet said, turning his body to Cheng while keeping a sharp eyes on Li. “He ran into my ex, the Dai Li got involved, he saved their lives, then that Spirit bitch tried to kill him so he dealt with her. Permanently.”

Shit. Cheng didn’t look too good.

Jet groaned and began undoing his belt, careful to keep his swords from clunking on the ground. “Relax,” he drawled. “The Dai Li won’t be coming. Even if they did bother to show up, it’d be to thank him. They owe Li. Speaking of,” he turned fully and caught Cheng’s brown gaze with his own, “Li is a waterbender. Remember that,” he said, holding up a finger. “He makes ice. The Dai Li know that. They saw that. If anyone asks, tell them he’s a waterbender.”

The older man’s gaze narrowed. “I wasn’t born yesterday, boy,” he said not unkindly. “I’ll send a messenger to Than and Ying so they know where their nephew is.”

“Okay,” Jet said, just loud enough to be heard. “Don’t wake them. I’ll tell them myself in the morning.”

“Li, are you sure?” Jet asked gently.

Li nodded, still refusing to turn around and face them. He couldn’t. Not yet. Not until he had come to terms with himself. At least a little bit.

The dim light from the narrow hallway slowly faded until, with the soft sound of the door closing, it vanished completely leaving him and Jet in the dark. Zenko slipped from his shoulders, landing on one of the nearby boxes with a muffled thump. Her paws moved from box to box until she reached the window sill. She nudged the metal latch open allowing the shutter to swing out and the cool night air to blow in.

The breeze was cool and refreshing, swirling through the musty smell of the small room making Li shiver. His thoughts were still jumbled and confused as they tried to sort through his memories.
Each memory was a puzzle piece that should fit snugly in place, but the new ones didn’t exactly match what had already been solved. Lu Ten. Uncle Mushi. The flaming hand that burned away his face. The girl he could barely remember but knew and loved and feared.

And now this.

Why was it that every time he was beginning to think he was making headway, something would blinds ide him and rip his delicately crafted puzzle apart again? What had he done in the past he couldn’t recall that was so terrible he deserved a backlash for it even now? Even when he still couldn’t remember his own name?

Descendant of the Avatar. Not the Avatar himself. Li knew he was only Fire. He wasn’t a descendant of the current Avatar either. Li had met the boy and there was just no way. So a previous Avatar, most likely a Fire Avatar. Names. He needed names. He needed to think.

Was that why Wan Shi Tong hadn’t attacked him the first time he’d gone to his library? Was that why Zenko chose to stay with him? Was that why his face was burned? Was that why someone wanted him dead so badly? His fingers touched his shirt, feeling the light pressure against his scar. Was that why he was hunted? Because he was a descendant of the Avatar?

“She was born lucky. You were lucky to be born.”

He was slipping, his thoughts losing their clarity as his mind continued to spiral in on themselves. He should be panicking.

“You will learn respect and suffering will be your teacher.”

The same voice. The same person. He knew that person. He loved that person. Loved and feared. Someone who broke his heart every time he thought of them.

“Hey.”

He stiffened when arms slipped around him from behind, entwining their fingers together and pulling him flush against a warm chest. He could feel Jet’s body heat through his clothes and the brush of Jet’s breath against the back of his neck. Jet lifted their entwined hands and pressed their palms against Li’s chest. Messy brown hair tickled his scarred cheek just before lips touched his jaw.

“I’m here.”

It was the truth, and it was a promise. Jet was here with him now. He wasn’t going to leave him. No matter how dark Li’s cheeks got. Or how much Jet found his blush amusing.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jet whispered right below Li’s ear, well aware of the way Li’s breath stuttered. Jet traced Li’s throat with his nose, pressing another kiss where the fabric of Li’s collar stopped.

No, he didn’t want to talk about it. Not right now. He wasn’t ready yet.

Jet hummed softly. “Do you want me to stay?”

Li tightened his grip on Jet’s hands with his fingers and turned his face so he could see dark chestnut-almond eyes gleam in the dim streetlight. Jet’s lips quirked like the shadows of leaves in a silent night breeze.
“Is that a yes?”

The angle was awkward, but Li could make do. Besides, the way Jet sighed when their lips touched was well worth the blush and the creak in his neck.

This was dangerous. One slip… But, however dangerous it was, it was also safe. It felt safe. This made Li’s nerves dance for other, better reasons. Here he could be Li and not whoever he once was, whoever someone wanted dead, whoever was Mushi the tea maker’s nephew. Here, in the darkness and Jet’s embrace, he was just Li. He could be who he wanted to be.

“You should sleep.”

No. “Not yet.” Rough, dry lips met once more. “Please.”

“Alright.”

He was tired. He was so tired. But he didn’t want to sleep quite yet. He would dream, and he knew most of those dreams would be nightmares. He’d rather be with Jet here and now than suffer through nightmare after nightmare from fear, anxiety, and the few puzzling memories he had meshing together in a macabre performance that wouldn’t end until daybreak.

Here, Jet’s chest and hands were warm. Here, his breath tickled. Here. Jet was here. If he wouldn’t leave, then neither would Li.

Closing his eyes, he leaned into Jet’s warmth and let his head tilt back to rest on his boyfriend’s shoulder. Lips touched the side of his throat, feeling the unsteady pulse there. Fingers that weren’t his own spread out over his chest, startling a hiss from him when a nail caught on a clothed nipple.

In, hold, out. In, lips parted revealing a hint of teeth, hold, a finger kneaded the stiffening nub through fabric, out, sharper and shakier than he meant to.

“Jet.”

His collar was loose now and fingers were tugging it aside, baring more skin to hot, rough lips and teeth. He hissed when teeth buried into the skin where his neck met his shoulder, suckling and licking. There would be a mark there he would have to hide. Later. Not here. Not now.

“...Jet.”

“Mine, Li.” He could feel those words as lips pressed each syllable into his skin. “You’re mine, Li.”

Here. Now. Yes. Whatever tomorrow brought, here and now, Li belonged to Jet. And strangely, he didn’t mind in the slightest.

Untangling the fingers of one hand, Li reached up and grabbed a handful of wild hair and pulled earning him a pleased grunt. Something began pressing against his bottom, hard and insistent, and Li sighed, his mouth twitching into a small smirk. Jet was hard and it was all Li’s fault. He didn’t regret it.

But… He wasn’t sure he was ready to go all the way. Soon. But not yet. He was too tired right now, too raw. He still wanted Jet, though.

Fingers calloused from swords and trees fiddled with the two frog knots holding Li’s long, dark brown tunic closed over his green, long-sleeved shirt came free. Jet slid a hand between the tunic
and the shirt and just pressed, holding Li firmly in place. The other hand drifted down, undoing Li’s belt and moving… lower…

“You have no idea how often I’ve thought about doing this,” Jet whispered, his voice thick with lust. His fingers massaged the area an inch or so above where Li wanted. “You. Me. And a wall.”

Li knew Jet hadn’t missed the way his pulse jumped or his cheeks heated.

“I won’t go all the way.” The fingers drifted closer, so close, as Jet continued to speak against Li’s skin. “But can I…” Jet shuddered and Li didn’t bother to smother his proud grin. “Spirits, Li. Can I?”

“Yes.”

“Ugh, fuck.”

The hand that had been oh-so close was now, suddenly there and Li’s entire body jerked. Jet chuckled and bit his shoulder again. Slowly but surely, Jet began rocking so his clothed erection poked Li’s clothed bottom in time with each stroking fondle of Li’s own erection. Warm. Too many layers. Damn clothes.

Li freed one of his hands and pushed his pants down until he felt Jet’s clothes press against his bare behind and Jet’s hand gripped his hot, sensitive skin. His entire body jolted from both the cold and the sudden heat that pulsed with life and Fire to the beat of Jet’s heart. Then the hand was gone no! and the warmth of Jet’s chest was replaced by the coolness of a wood and stone wall.

Before he had the chance to fully comprehend the change in position, lips covered his and he forgot to ask. Hands flattened against his back and slid down over the fabric of his clothes, then underneath to grip his cheeks and pull him closer. Jet’s heat pressed against his own startling a gasp from him that was quickly swallowed by the kiss. Then Jet rolled his hips and Li had no choice but to latch onto his boyfriend and roll back.

He was inexperienced, yes. But he wasn’t totally ignorant or stupid. He knew what his body wanted, what he wanted. The hands on his bottom squeezed and massaged and encouraged the rhythmic rolling to continue. It was getting harder to keep his voice smothered by self-control. It was even harder when Jet’s lips drifted away from his own and started moving down his throat, lingering on a nipple, teasing his fluttering stomach, and… lower…

Li had an idea of what Jet was going to do, but he was still caught off guard when it actually happened. When Jet helped Li step fully out of his pants and brushed aside the dangling fabric from his jacket, Li buried one hand in his boyfriend’s dark hair and slapped the other over his mouth. Then heat and pressure surrounded him and his knees almost gave way.

He slumped against the wall, his hand escaping his mouth to desperately find something to hold on to or support him. One breathless gasp later and the hand returned to his mouth just in time to dampen a feeble whine. He was shaking and shivering and Jet was moving and his legs were quaking and he had to breathe!

The hands on his bottom supported him and helped him stay upright so he didn’t just slump to the floor. He wanted… He needed… His own hand flung out and scrabbled at the wall next to him for something to hold on to. His fingers found the window sill and they clung to it, using it as the leverage he needed to move and not fall to the floor. He just had to keep his voice down. Somehow.
“...J-Jet...”

Jet hummed like the bastard he was and it took everything Li had to not come. So close. He was so close. It was too soon though. He couldn't hold out as long as he wanted to. He couldn’t-

Jet hollowed his cheeks and sucked and Li tensed. His eyes rolled back in his head and his mouth fell open in a barely stifled moan as he came. Jet didn’t move from his spot between Li’s legs, swallowing everything and propping up Li’s exhausted body.

When he did finally lean back, he smirked with all the lustful pride of a satisfied lover and Li whined. Getting to his feet, Jet captured Li’s mouth with his own, thrusting his tongue inside and letting Li taste himself. Li shuddered and winced at the taste, but he didn’t have the strength or desire to stop.

Jet was still bracing him, holding him upright against the wall. Then he felt the prick of Jet’s erection and he broke the kiss himself to look down, ashamed. He had been so caught up in his own pleasure that he hadn’t noticed Jet still hadn’t come yet. How could he be so selfish?

A kiss pressed against his scarred eyelid then, “Do you trust me?”

What kind of question was that? After everything they’d been through... After everything they had just done?!

Jet held him still, resisting Li’s efforts to squirm away.

“Do you trust me, Li?” Jet whispered once more.

Li shuddered, swallowing over a dry throat, and nodded. “Yes.”

Another kiss. “Then turn around.”

Oh. Li bit his lip and, with Jet’s help, made his wobbly legs work. When he faced the wall, he felt Jet press himself flush against his back. He could feel his boyfriend’s clothed erection right there, almost where he wanted and didn’t want it.

Such a strange juxtaposition of emotions. He wanted everything Jet could and would give, but he wasn’t sure he was ready for it all right now. Was that allowed? Was he allowed to trust Jet but not want... that... all the way... yet?

Fingers trailed along Li’s lower lip, gently encouraging him to open his mouth and let them in. He could feel Jet’s entire body shiver against his back when he licked each finger individually. He wasn’t particularly fond of things in his mouth, but for this he would make an exception. For Jet only.

When the fingers were gone, Jet backed up slightly. Li could hear Jet hissing as he moved his saliva covered hand over his erection. Li trusted Jet. He did.

“Put your legs together,” Jet murmured, kissing the nape of Li’s neck.

...oh... That felt good... Jet breathed a laugh and kissed him there again.

Obediently, Li adjusted his stance so his legs were touching.

“Now squeeze them together,” Jet breathed against the sensitive hairs on Li’s neck and damn him that felt good and he knew it. One of Jet’s fingers slipped between Li’s legs. “Tighter,” he
whispered. “Tighter. There. Like that.” Another kiss. “Now hold there for me, Li. Just like that.”

Then something bigger than a finger thrust between Li’s legs, skimming the surface of the twitching hole he wasn’t ready to use yet and continuing until Jet was once again flush against him. This… wasn’t bad. It wasn’t what he wanted, but it was what he needed. He could wait for the rest. They both could. But in the meantime, this would do.

Ah! Especially when Jet moved like that. Li gasped when Jet’s hips bucked again, slamming his hips against Li’s bottom and thrusting his penis between Li’s thighs. It wasn’t the most pleasurable thing Li had ever felt, very little could compare to Jet’s mouth, but it did feel good. And it was getting Jet off which was more than enough for both of them.

One of Jet’s hands settled on Li’s hips, guiding him so their rhythms could match up better. The sound of flesh slapping flesh was swallowed by the dark, storage filled room and Li was again glad his blush wasn’t visible. He could feel it burning in his cheeks, intensifying with every breathless gasp and barely muffled moan and whimper that escaped him.

He braced his hands on the wall for leverage and arched his back. Jet’s body moved with his and it felt so good.

“Li.”

He shuddered. Jet’s other hand found one of his nipples once more and pinched it, causing Li to tense and tighten his legs together. Jet hissed and bucked, biting Li’s ear hard enough to startle a gasp from his boyfriend.

“Li.”

Again and again, Jet whispered Li’s name by his ear almost like a prayer.

“Jet,” he gasped.

Jet grunted, his hips stuttering before pounding in and lingering, riding out the waves of his own orgasm. Li could feel it trickling down his legs and, while he knew it would be disgusting later, it made him feel proud right now. He had done this. He was responsible for this. He had been the one Jet wanted to do this with. Him. Li.

Would Jet want to do this with the person Li once was?

Don’t think about it. Think about the here and now and Jet and the come dribbling down his legs and the hoarse gasping by his ear and the warm body draped over his back.

Li waited patiently while Jet gathered himself. Then he knelt and turned around so he could cup both of Jet’s cheeks with his hands and kiss him. Jet shifted to a more comfortable position and Li obligingly climbed into Jet’s lap, straddling his boyfriend’s waist. For an indeterminate amount of time, they just sat there kissing, clinging, and basking in each other’s presence.

Li wasn’t sure when or how, but they ended up lying on the dusty floor tangled in a couple of the spare blankets scavenged from the storage boxes. Li’s jacket was draped on top of them as an extra blanket. A bag of dried rice served as Jet’s makeshift pillow and Jet’s chest was Li’s pillow. They were warm and sated and exhausted.

But Li wasn’t afraid to fall asleep now. He doubted he would dream at all tonight. He was too happy to have nightmares. Fur brushed his back as Zenko curled into a ball against him. He smiled and let his mind begin to drift off.
Later, he wouldn’t remember saying anything. But Jet would remember.

“Jet,” Li murmured in a voice muddled by sleep. “Love you.”
The morning dawned like any other. The fireworks from the previous night had ebbed early enough for him to fall asleep with relative ease. He stayed up to watch them until they stopped at curfew. It had been late, but no later than usual. A few stray bursts of color and sound occasionally echoed in the silent night, but years of camping on the front line had taught Iroh how to sleep through explosions.

Yesterday had been easy and fulfilling, if heartbreaking. Watching the sunset from that shady knoll in the Agrarian Zone had been peaceful. The birds twittered a fond farewell to Agni’s shining face in tune to Iroh’s newly bought liuqin.

If only Zuko had been there to gift Lu Ten’s memorial with his tsungi horn talent. Iroh made a mental note to find a tsungi horn at a music shop one day. He missed hearing his nephew’s music. Whether the boy remembered or not, the muscle memory would never really go away.

He hummed lowly to himself as he made his way to Pao’s teahouse. The roads were still quiet and mostly empty due to the early hour. The sky above the Inner Wall was just beginning to glow from the newly risen sun.

He tucked his hands into his sleeves and lifted his head, his amber eyes habitually seeking out the small tea shop. Strange. The green lanterns by the front door were unlit. Pao was always prompt at lighting those. Perhaps the poor man was still busy inside.

Stifling a lazy yawn, Iroh turned down the alley adjacent to the tea shop and approached the back door. It was locked. How unusual. He knocked gently on the wood.

“Pao,” he called just loud enough to be heard but softly enough to not unduly rouse any still sleeping neighbors. “Pao, it’s Mushi. Are you in?”
Just when Iroh began to worry, he heard the sound of wood sliding against wood and the door opened. Goodness, Pao looked awful. There were dark circles under his eyes as if the man hadn’t slept the night before. His face was pale and he was obviously weary.

“Oh dear,” Iroh sighed in sympathy. “Pao, are you alright?”

The tea shop owner wilted but managed a weak smile. “Better now that you’re here, honestly,” he said, stepping aside to allow Iroh into the kitchen.

“What happened?” Iroh asked, settling his small bag of personal items into the employees’ storage cubby in the corner. “Is everything alright?”

Pao groaned and wiped his face with his hand. “Oh, I could go on for days, Mushi,” he said. “Suffice it to say, I had to close early yesterday and that boy Li deserves a stern talking to. If he comes in this morning at all.”

Oh dear. “May I ask why?” Iroh said, helping Pao finish preparing the tea. He set the kettles on the hot surface where they could safely come to a gentle boil. “Li has always been a quiet boy. He never seemed to cause much trouble.”

“That is true,” Pao admitted. “But…” He sighed. “Apparently several restaurants in the restaurant district up the road had to be shut down yesterday due to contamination of some kind.”

“Mm, that is not good news.” Contaminated food. That was never a pleasant experience. Should the victim live, the resulting illness sometimes made them wish they were dead. “Did they find the source?” he asked.

Pao nodded. “I believe so,” he said slowly. “Apparently there was a body found in the well in the restaurant district. A woman.”

Oh, Agni have mercy. “Suicide do you think?” Iroh guessed.

Pao winced. “The City Guard was less willing to give details considering the… Well, I doubt the body was in a very… decent state when they found it, all things considered.”

“Oh,” Iroh sighed, heartsick. “My condolences to her family. It is never easy to lose a child.”

The tea shop owner forehead creased in sympathy. “I cannot say I understand your pain,” he said slowly. “I’ve never had a wife or children of my own.” His placed a hand on the wall and looked around the empty tea shop with dark brown eyes. “But I can imagine the pain of losing this place. I’ve thrown everything I have into this little teahouse. It’s been in my family for generations. No disrespect meant, Mushi, but this old place has become my child. If I lost it…”

“None taken, my friend,” Iroh said, patting Pao’s shoulder fondly. “We all have something or someone we value more than we can put to words. Something that would deal such pain upon the heart should it be taken away that recovery may, at times, seem unachievable.” He smiled. “But we must never forget that there is always hope. There is always dawn after the darkest night.”

Pao eyed Iroh. “Do you always have proverbs for situations like this?” he asked suspiciously.

Iroh chuckled. “My nephew would say I do.”

“Have you found him yet?” Pao asked, his expression easing to something like fond worry.

“I have,” Iroh said, turning back to the kitchen when one of the tea kettles began to whistle. “Now
he must find himself. When he does that, he shall find me. I can be patient.”

The huff from behind him did nothing to smother the amusement from Iroh’s heart. If, Agni forbid, Zuko did not come in for his shift today, then Iroh would ask that young man Jet to find him. Or perhaps Jin if she came first. They both seemed to be friends of Zuko.

Zuko had friends. Lu Ten would give Zuko never ending grief for that. Iroh was so proud of his son-by-heart. So very proud. Speaking of-

"Oh yes, you never did tell me why you were upset with young Li," Iroh said, nudging the teahouse owner gently with his elbow.

"It's not much of a story really," Pao said, sighing and turning back to the kitchen. "I sent him to get more water with that customer girl Jin. We ran out, you see."

Iroh blinked in surprise. "We ran out of water?" he gasped in surprise. Yesterday must have been incredibly busy.

"Yes. With so many restaurants forced to close," Pao said, shrugging wearily as he checked one of the kettles, "we were packed with customers. More than I could count and more than could safely fit in here." He rubbed his face. "But they never came back. Li and the girl."

"Never came back, you say?" Iroh said, feeling fear take root in his heart. "What do you mean?"

"What I said," Pao said, waving his hand absently. "They left with the buckets and didn't come back. I couldn't leave the place unmanaged so I shut everything down. That boy Jet stopped by later on looking for them, but he never came back either."

Never came back. Dear Agni above, watch over Zuko. Should anything happen to his nephew, Iroh would show no mercy.

Jet woke first and was immensely proud of himself. Next to him, Li had rolled over sometime during his sleep so he lay on his stomach, his head resting on the bag of rice facing Jet. Zenko was snuggled up to Li’s other side so her head lay on the firebender’s back. Jet couldn’t tell if she was awake or not, but he wouldn’t put it past her if she was awake and just faking it. Did Spirits even sleep in the first place?

Either way, Li was still out cold and snoring softly. Jet slowly sat up, taking care not to disturb his exhausted boyfriend. He untangled himself from the blanket and stretched, enjoying the satisfying pops in his back and shoulders and neck. Oh yeah, this was the way to wake up.

Well, he glanced down at his morning erection with a quiet huff of wry amusement, he could think of other better ways to wake up. But a nice cold scrubbing would solve that problem. Or... He glanced down at Li still slumbering away next to him and touched himself. Damn Li was so sexy like that. Sexy always, but Spirits that blanket left absolutely nothing to the imagination.

He could still see where the milky white of his come had dribbled down Li’s legs from the night before. Li was a virgin. It was so painfully obvious and so incredibly hot. Li wasn’t Jet’s first, but he was definitely the best. And Jet hadn’t even properly fucked him yet. Just the memory of Li’s face when he came down Jet’s throat, his golden eyes rolling back in his head, his mouth hanging open in a breathless moan, and pale, calloused fingers clutching Jet’s hair like his life depended on it-
He sank back against the wall and chuckled. Yeah, he definitely needed a good scrubbing. So did Li actually. Who knows. Maybe Jet would get lucky in the bathhouse. Nothing serious. Just a little tease here and there. He knew Li could be demanding when he put his mind to it. Better start getting Li ready to be demanding for later.

:You Humans are so odd.:  
Jet snorted. “You’re just jealous,” he said, ruffling Li’s hair fondly. He smiled at the sleepy moan the motion drew from his boyfriend as Li slowly woke up.

:Hardly.:  
“Jet?”
He dropped his gaze to Li’s dim, sleep gummed eyes and grinned. “Hey there, sleepy head,” he teased, deliberately brushing Li’s black bangs into his boyfriend’s eyes. “Sleep well?”

Li wrinkled his nose when the hair tickled it, sweeping the hair back. It was still too short to be tucked behind his ear, but long enough to catch on other strands and stay out of his face. Mostly. Li slowly rolled to his side and pushed himself up so he leaned heavily against Jet’s shoulder.

“Morning,” he mumbled. His hand reached out to scratch the not-fox behind her ears earning him a pleased warble. “I need a bath.”

Zenko barked and batted him lightly on the leg. Her teeth flashed in victory.

“I think a certain someone likes the irony here,” Jet said with a smirk.

Li rolled his eyes and removed his hand from Zenko’s fur to sulk. Jet snickered and reached up to massage the back of his boyfriend’s neck.

“Good thing they have a bathhouse here,” he said, slowly moving the fabric of Li’s loose collar away from his throat.

The mark he left there from last night was still dark and blatantly obvious against Li’s pale skin. Li grimaced and reached up to pluck at Jet’s fingers, blotches of color blooming in his face. Grinning, Jet leaned around Li’s body and latched onto the mark with his teeth and lips. Li’s startled gasp was music to his ears and the fingernails digging into his back and hair was all the reward he could have asked for. He suckled the mark for several seconds, just to be sure it didn’t fade too fast, before finally letting go and leaning away.

Li’s face was glowing like an oven. Jet could feel the heat of the blush from here. He planted a lazy kiss on Li’s lips and got to his feet, tugging Li up with him.

“Come on, Li,” he said, reaching to pull on his pants and undershirt. He wasn’t afraid to walk around naked, but not with children nearby. “Here,” he said, tossing Li his brown pants. “Put those on and we can go take a bath. You too, pretty lady,” he added to Zenko.

The Spirit fox instantly sat up and wagged her tails, gekkering happily. Li, however, wilted and ran a hand through his messy hair guiltily.

“I, um, lost her soap,” Li said, avoiding Zenko’s close-eyed gaze. “I think I left it back at Than and Ying's but...” He shrugged. “I don't really feel like walking all the way back there right now.”
The fox Spirit chirped and hopped onto Li’s shoulder by way of several stacked boxes and nuzzled his scarred cheek. Jet smiled in amusement.

“Somehow, I doubt she minds that much,” he said. “Besides,” he added with a playful wink, “she can always win more money off of Ruolan at Mah Jong later.”

Zenko bounced on Li’s shoulder and yowled excitedly. A reluctant smile worked its way onto Li’s face as the kitsune’s tails batted the back of his head enthusiastically. He did try to shush her though because people lived in the potter’s complex and he didn’t want to wake anyone up.

After a brief struggle to pull his pants on, and an adorably dark blush when Li saw the dried remains of last night’s efforts on his thighs, Li followed Jet out of the storage room turned bedroom. Together, they made their way down the hall towards the stairs leading to the courtyard. A few potters were already at their wheels for the day while others were checking the active kilns and counting the finished products, marking most of them for sale.

The potter’s complex was large enough to have its own bathhouse on the far side of the courtyard from the main entrance. It wasn’t anything like the numerous public bathhouses scattered throughout the city where people went to relax and cleanse. It was just there for the residents to maintain proper cleanliness.

The bathhouse was split in half with the men’s baths to the left and women’s to the right. Jet steered Li to the left, holding the curtain aside for them to enter. Several wooden tubs that came up almost to their knees lined the far wall with thin paper screens separating each tub and privacy curtains hanging between the screens for a semblance of privacy. A few of the curtains were tied back indicating the tubs were open, but most were hanging free indicating the tub was in use.

Jet picked the open tub in the stall by the far wall both because it was the furthest from the door and conveniently had an open stall on the other side. Making sure Li was by his side, he tugged the curtain closed behind them and started stripping.

Li knelt and pumped the handle to allow some water to flow from the well below ground to the tub. He didn’t bother to fill it up entirely, just enough to get a good scrubbing for the three of them. Zenko hopped off his shoulders and into the water, yelping at the cool temperature. After a shy glance around the sheltered stall, Li reached into the water and breathed, pushing some of his own heat into the water and encouraging the water itself to warm up.

Odd. It almost felt like something was… vibrating. He swished his hand around the water while his other hand continued to pump. Once the tub was decently full, he waited for Zenko to hop into the water before grabbing the soap and lathering her fur. She deserved this so Li took his time. The fact she wouldn’t be as stinky after this was another reason to make sure he scrubbed her good and thoroughly.

Ow!

And to think Li could be bathing himself right now. If he’d done that, he wouldn’t have to deal with sharp, foxy teeth digging into his hands. Muttering under his breath, he went back to scrubbing the gray-black fur, running his fingers over each of her tails.

When hands gripped his shoulders and squeezed, he tensed. When the hands began massaging and rubbing and kneading, he sighed and let his shoulders relax. He started splashing water over
Zenko’s fur, washing out the bubbles. She deserved this, yes, but so did he. The harder those hands worked his aching shoulders, the more distinctly he felt the dried come on his thighs. Jet was doing this on purpose.

It felt like forever before the fox Spirit was finally clean. She was still soaking wet, but she made short work of that. She hopped out of the tub and shook herself, spraying both Li and Jet remorselessly. Li had a sneaking suspicion that was punishment for flirting while scrubbing her. He’d take it.

She chirped once, then pranced out of the stall. Li knew she wouldn’t be far, but he still poked his head out from behind the curtain to watch her leave the bathhouse. A splash pulled his attention back to the tub where Jet was now sprawled, stark naked and grinning. Jet hooked a finger, enticing Li to come join him and yes, it was a little warm in here who’s asking?

With a sigh, Li shrugged out of his coat and shirt and tugged his pants down. He folded them up and set them in the corner where Jet had tossed his. He took a deep, calming breath, got to his feet, and turned to the tub.

Sure enough, Jet lay sprawled on his back, arms resting on the wooden ledges and legs spread wide shamelessly. Thank Agni a few suds covered the more embarrassing parts. It really was warm in here. Where was Li supposed to sit anyway? Jet was taking up the whole tub. Jet winked and Li rolled his eyes.

He stepped into the empty space between Jet’s hip and the tub’s side. Oh. Um, well, yeah, Li knew exactly what Jet wanted and yes, this was going to be incredibly awkward. Agni have mercy. It was too early for this.

He didn’t have a choice. If he wanted to keep his balance, he had to do it. Gulping past his burning face, Li leaned down and braced himself on the wooden ledges on either side of Jet’s head. He could feel Jet’s dark eyes watching and appreciating his every move from beneath him. He ignored it as best he could.

Shifting his weight, he slowly sank down to his knees so he straddled Jet’s hips. Exactly as the smug swordsman intended. Ah, perhaps swordsman wasn’t the, erm, best word given the circumstances. Li shifted awkwardly and felt the distinct feeling of Jet’s penis pressing against his behind.

“You did this on purpose,” he whispered, very aware of the other people in the bathhouse.

Jet’s grin was smug but his hands were warm where they gripped and massaged Li’s hips. “Of course I did,” he said.

His hands began sliding down Li’s thighs under the water, rubbing the dried come off. Oh Agni. Li gulped.

“And you are warming up the water,” Jet said, squeezing Li’s thighs.

He was? Li blinked in surprise then hung his head. “You’re definitely doing this on purpose,” he moaned, covering his burning face with his hands.

“Already said I was,” Jet said, using Li’s thighs to pull himself up to sitting position. He slid his warm, damp hands up Li’s sides and around his back until Li was enveloped in a hug. “I told you, remember? The day I took you to the library?” He pressed his lips to Li’s ear and whispered, “I have a thing for water.”
“They’ll hear,” Li breathed, digging his fingernails into Jet’s back hard enough to leave marks. It was only fair. If Jet could mark him, then Li could mark Jet.

“Then I guess you’ll have to be quiet,” Jet murmured, then latched onto the bite mark on Li’s neck and began rocking.

Zenko swished her tails. She was fresh and clean and, after a nice nap in the sunshine, would soon be fluffy. She could sense Li’s mind slipping away from words and falling into feelings and sensations and shook herself.

Humans were quite odd. She didn’t think she would ever understand their propensity to have intercourse. From what she saw last night, she had questions. She knew it was the process by which mortal creatures reproduced, but it would seem intercourse was done for more reasons than just that. Most curious. She would have to look into that.

She found a comfortable spot on the low stone wall surrounding the kilns and lay down with a luxurious stretch and wide yawn. Some of the younger Humans were starting to come down from the living quarters, but not the youngest. She would have to snag her nap soon of she planned on having any relaxation before the little Humans appeared.

She enjoyed playing with them, but she also enjoyed naps. This Human invention was truly a wonder. Oh, itch. She shifted her body so she could scratch the itch behind her ear, shaking herself and fluffing her freshly clean fur when she was finished.

A flash of green darted across the roof, catching her attention. She looked directly at it, observing its Earthen green spirit. Dai Li. Not Tengfei or Shanyuan. But perhaps she could say hello. She knew Li would want to know about those two as soon as he was finished and had his mind back from Jet’s grasp.

“What? He’s here?!”

Hm? The warm green spirits that were too dim to be benders but that she had come to know and grow attached to were standing near the entrance of the potter’s complex. She snorted. It seemed she wouldn’t have her nap after all. She would greet Ying and Than and the tiny Human Hope. Then if the Dai Li was still there, she would pay them a visit.
Name

Chapter Summary

In which Li gets a group hug, Ying listens to Jet, and Jet tells the truth.

Chapter Notes

A/N: My Dad went in to have back surgery today. It was supposed to be relatively simple (for a complicated surgery anyway), but there was a complication. While the doctors were working through the small incision in his back, they nicked an vein. Veins have thin walls and are easier to cut as opposed to arteries which have thick walls and are harder to cut.

After a lot of blood loss, two more large incisions, and a second cardiovascular surgeon stepped in to help, Dad got out of surgery. But he had to have a lot of blood transfusions and is in a lot of pain (when he's awake and not medicated through the roof) and swollen. It'll take time for his kidneys to filter everything out so he'll be in the hospital for a week or more rather than the planned few days. Then the doctors will attempt the surgery to fix his back again on Monday if his body has recovered enough.

So that was my day. ...It wasn't a good day. Any prayers, good vibes, and good thoughts y'all could send our way would be much appreciated. Dad's stable but in the ICU. I'm 85% certain he'll be ok given enough time. But I'm still scared. He's my Dad. I don't want to lose him.

...and on that note...

Ying clutched little Hope to her chest and turned her head towards a very familiar, spine-tingling howl. Sure enough, making her way across the courtyard was little Zenko. Her gray-black fur was damp and sticking together in some places. Even the reddish tufts by her ears were darker from water. She must have been cleaned.

Which meant Li had cleaned her. Ying doubted the fox Spirit would ever allow anyone other than Li to clean her. Come to think of it, the complex bathhouse was that way. Was Li there now?

Hitching Hope close so she wouldn’t bounce, Ying hurried out into the courtyard to meet Zenko halfway. Than reached the fox Spirit first but didn’t stop there. Or, at least, he hadn’t meant to stop there. Zenko seemed to have other ideas. She chirped and chomped down hard on Than’s pants leg, dug her paws into the ground, and held on forcing Ying’s husband to stagger to a halt or risk dragging the small fox Spirit.

:It would be best to wait.:”

Ying shivered at the unnatural voice in her head. Than reacted similarly, lowering his captured foot
and crouching down to face the blue-eyed Spirit directly.

“Why?” he asked. “Is he alright?”

“Is he well?” Ying asked, joining her husband. “What happened? He never came back last night and we thought—” She bit off the end of her words and swept her gaze over the expanse of the complex’s roof that was within sight. “We were worried,” she said reluctantly.

Zenko released her toothy hold on Than’s pants and bumped her nose against his knee. :He is well:, she said, her glowing gaze settling on Hope. Her ears flipped up curiously. :He is uninjured, but his mind is tired. The Dai Li arrested him.: 

Ying felt her spirit freeze and her heart plunge into the depths of the Earth. Li, her precious boy, had been arrested by… No. No but that didn’t make sense! Zenko said Li was well. She implied Li was here. How could Li be here if he had been arrested?

“Explain,” she demanded fiercely.

The fox Spirit stiffened abruptly. Her mouth slammed shut and she stared at Ying silently for a few seconds in surprise. Slowly, her ears folded back against her head and she sat on the grassy ground. :Truly, mothers are frightening creatures,: the Spirit murmured thoughtfully. :A waterbender recognized Li and turned him in as a firebender.: 

No.

:However, a friend and a young Dai Li helped him escape.: 

Ying listened to everything and slowly felt her heart ache. Her boy… She was so proud of her boy. She was still reeling from the fantastical Spirit tale that had been their Li’s life over the past few days when Than turned to her with his soft brown eyes. She reached out and clutched his hand in a comforting motion that served to soothe herself as well.

When the fox Spirit closed her eyes and turned her head to something behind her, both Ying and Than followed the unseeing gaze. There, staggering out of the bathhouse with damp hair and a flush dark enough to rival a Fire Nation soldier’s uniform, was their Li. Next to him, one hand hooked securely around Li’s waist and the other poking Li’s scarred cheek playfully, was Jet.

Well, well.

Jet laughed merrily at something Li said and noticed Ying and Than first. He grinned and nudged Li, pointing at them and saying something too quiet for Ying to hear. But whatever it was, Li immediately looked up with wide eyes that practically glittered with hope.

Ying was already running to him before Li could make a move. She looped her free arm around his neck and pulled him into a tight embrace, mindful of Hope now nestled between them. Li tensed in surprise but still lifted his own arms and wrapped them gingerly around Ying. She felt Than’s warmth against her back and strong arms settling comfortably around her and Li and smiled.

This was her family. This was the way it should be. All of them together. All of them safe.

“I… I’m sorry,” she heard Li whisper. “I didn’t mean to-”

“Shh,” she whispered. “We know. Zenko told us. It’s alright. You’re safe now. That’s all that matters.” She pressed a kiss to her boy’s scarred cheek. “Hope missed you, you know.”
She felt more than heard Li’s soft huff of a laugh and tilted her head so they could all look down at the tiny baby in her arms. Hope gurgled happily and reached out to Li’s face with her tiny, grabby hands. One of Li’s hands loosened its hold on her back and slipped between them so Hope could grab and hold it. The smile on Li’s face could have brightened a sunless day.

“Li,” Than said softly, resting a hand on their boy’s head. “Are you alright? We heard…”

“I had help,” Li said, glancing to the side where Jet stood. “Jin and two Dai Li helped us get rid of the Spirit. One of them was wounded, badly.” Oh no. “I have to go check on them today. I have to make sure he made- I have to be sure he’s okay.”

Ying may not have fond feelings for the Dai Li, but this one did no harm to her family. She sincerely hoped that he survived, for Li’s sake if nothing else.

“Does Pao know what happened?” Than asked. “You were working yesterday. Did someone tell him?”

“Never got the chance,” Jet said suddenly, drawing their attention. “Pao sent him to get water and the rock became an avalanche. Pao thought Li had run off with Jin.”

Li made a pathetic sound and blushed a vibrant red which did not go unnoticed by anyone.

Jet snickered. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I set Pao straight on that one.” He winked and Ying chuckled while Than rubbed Li’s back. “But,” Jet continued, his smirk fading, “neither of us had the chance to get back and explain anything to him. We got back a little after curfew last night and crashed in the spare room.”

“Cheng mentioned that,” Than said, nodding. “He didn’t say why he didn’t send us a messenger letting us know what happened.”

“Ah, that was my fault,” Li mumbled shyly. He made to lift his hand an rub his neck only to hesitate when Hope complained and tightened her grip on his captive finger. “I told him not to,” he admitted. “I didn’t want to wake you. It was already late and I didn’t want-”

“Li,” Than said seriously, waiting until golden eyes lifted to his, “you wouldn’t have woken us. We didn’t get much sleep last night.”


“Because we didn’t know where you were,” Ying said, rubbing Li’s arm. “You’re our family, our nephew. Why wouldn’t we worry?”


Oh. Ying smiled and squeezed Li’s shoulder encouragingly. “That’s good news, Li,” she said. “We can find him and-”

“I already know where he is,” Li said, cutting her off. “I’m just not sure if…” He heaved a deep, unsteady sigh. “I’m not sure if he wants me to know him.”

Ying’s smiled slipped in disbelief.

“Why wouldn’t he want you to know him?” Than asked, stepped around Ying so he stand by his nephew’s side.
Li shrugged. “Because I’ve worked with him at the tea shop since I first started there and he never once said a word about it?” he said.

Ying felt her heart clench and sighed. That’s when she noticed the unsettled expression on Jet’s face. She didn’t know the boy as well as she knew Li or the other children in the potter’s complex, but she was a mother and mother’s knew when they’re children were keeping things from them. She waited for Jet’s dark umber eyes to notice her attention before lifting an expectant eyebrow.

It was subtle, but she could see the hints of guilt lining Jet’s down-turned lips. After what seemed like an intense internal struggle, Jet sighed. His shoulders drooped and he crossed his arms over his chest in an obvious withdrawal. Well, perhaps Jet wasn’t ready to spill in front of Li. But maybe he wouldn’t mind talking to a mother.

Turning to Li, Ying pulled her boy close and placed a soft kiss on his forehead. The wide-eyed awe on Li’s face whenever she did something like that both warmed her soul and made her heart ache. She pushed little Hope in Li’s welcoming arms and stepped back.

“I’ll be right back,” she said. “Watch her while I’m gone?”

As if Li could ever resist the chance to take care of little Hope. Ying knew full well her daughter had Li wrapped around her little finger. Li spoiled her and Ying adored watching.

But Jet needed her right now. With a subtle glance at her husband, she slipped aside and tugged Jet away. She waited until they were far enough away for Li not to hear them to begin speaking.

“What do you know?” she said. Perhaps it was heavy-handed to start off with a loaded question like that, but she had to know. If Jet was keeping something from Li who had already lost so much-

“He’s wrong about his uncle,” Jet said, shifting from foot to foot.

Ying narrowed her eyes, adjusting her position so Jet stood with his back to Li and Than. “How so?”

Jet pressed his lips together and sighed. “He did try to get Li to recognize him,” Jet said slowly, “it just didn’t work.”

“How do you know this?” Ying whispered.

The boy hesitated, looking over his shoulder at Li who Ying could see smiling and fawning over Hope like the besotted big brother he was. Than looked their way and Ying nodded subtly, returning her attention to Jet before he noticed her slip.

“I didn’t know about any of this when I met him,” Jet said suddenly. “I just knew him as Li, the kid from the ferry. I liked him then and that hasn’t changed.” Was that a blush on his cheeks? “It actually got worse,” Jet continued, ducking his head because that really was a blush.

“I went to the tea shop on my night off with my friends and met Mushi,” he said. “He’s the teamaker there. He told me about his missing nephew and…” He bit his lip. “It sounded a lot like Li. But Li never mentioned any uncle other than Than so I…” He lifted his shoulders in a helpless shrug. “I dismissed it. But then Li told me about his memory loss and I thought maybe…”

“You took him to the tea shop,” Ying whispered, gently encouraging Jet to continue when the boy trailed away nervously.

Messy brown hair ducked shyly. “I did,” he admitted. “I warned Mushi that Li might not recognize
him, but he tried anyway.” He shook his head. “Nothing. He didn’t try again.”

“Why not?” Ying pressed curiously.

“Because…” Jet lifted his eyebrows and shook his head as if unable to believe what he was saying. “He said Li’s father did that to him and that it wasn’t the first time something like that had happened and now I know who his father is and that means it was his own sister who tried to kill him in the ghost town and I can absolutely believe someone like that doing something so awful but I can’t believe that…”

His words caught in his throat and for a moment it looked like Jet was going to cry. Ying let the boy recover, reaching out to touch Jet’s elbow gently in silent encouragement while her mind tried to make sense of the rushing words. Jet knew who Li was and…

“I can’t believe he’s… Damn it, I…” Jet rubbed his face and Ying waited patiently while the boy sorted through his words. Finally- “He said he loved me last night,” Jet said, smiling in sad disbelief. “Did you know he’s the Blue Spirit?” What? “He’s wanted as a traitor to the Fire Nation for saving the Avatar’s life.”

“What?”

Jet froze, eyes wide with dawn horror. Ying sighed. She had hoped to learn more before Jet realized… Oma and Shu, have mercy. Jet turned to see Li standing there with Hope in his arms and Than standing behind him and gulped.

“Li,” he breathed.

“You knew.”

It wasn’t quite a question, but Jet still tried to answer. “I didn’t know until yesterday,” he said. “I swear. I knew you were Mushi’s nephew but-” He choked. “Holy shit. Mushi’s your uncle. That’s means he’s…” All the color in Jet’s face vanished leaving him pale and sickly. “Spirits, he’s inside Ba Sing Se.”

“Who?” Li demanded, his golden eyes shining with fierce hope and an authority Ying barely recognized. “Jet, who is in Ba Sing Se?”

Jet’s mouth moved but no sound came out. His eyes locked on Li and he looked… afraid. Li must have seen it too because his gaze saddened and he looked away.

“My word from the other night still stands,” Li said almost too quietly for Ying to hear. “If you want me to…”

Fur brushed Ying’s ankle and she looked down to see Zenko slink past her and sit on Li’s foot staring up at the two boys with her unseeing gaze.

“I don’t want you to go,” Jet said, reaching out and brushing his fingers against Li’s shirt sleeve. “I knew last night,” Li flushed a dark red, “and it didn’t change anything then and it doesn’t now.” Jet moved his hand from Li’s sleeve to the side of Li’s neck and the blush darkened. “I just…” Jet leaned close and pressed his forehead to Li’s. “I just need time to process this, is all.”

Hope gurgled in Li’s arms.

“Were you going to tell me?” Li asked.
“I was,” Jet replied. “But then everything happened and that was more important so…” He shrugged. “I put it all together yesterday, I swear.”

“I believe you,” Li said nodded, making Jet’s head move as well. “I do, I just- Is it really that bad?” he said in a voice that Ying could barely hear.


“That’s not very helpful,” Li griped in mild annoyance and Jet chuckled.

Ying stepped around the boys so she stood next to her husband. She snuggled into Than’s warmth when she felt him wrap an arm around her shoulders. She wasn’t really sure if Li and Jet remembered she and Than were there. They were so lost in their own little world. Which, she supposed, wasn’t a bad thing. So long as it got them talking now rather than later.

“Can you just tell me my name?” Li asked in a voice that was almost plaintive. “Just so I at least know something.”

Warbling startled the boys apart revealing Zenko’s semi-dry, furry face. Li winced as if he had been chastised but held the fox Spirit’s unseeing gaze.

“I deserve to know,” he said to her. “If Jet can tell me then I may learn a new way to keep my end of my deal with Wan Shi Tong.” Zenko chirped and pawed Li’s pants leg. “Because he knows more than just my name. He can give me context. Besides…” He knelt so he was at eye level with the kitsune. “I deserve to know my true name. Whether I choose to use it is up to me. I’ve waited almost a full month for this, Zenko. Please.”

“Why do you need Zenko’s permission to know your own name?” Than asked, eyeing the fox Spirit with newfound distrust. “It’s your name, not hers.”

“True,” Li said. “But Wan Shi Tong also offered me my name, he just wouldn’t give me context. So I refused. Knowing your name with no history to go with it would be like looking into a mirror and seeing no reflection. I suppose it would be comforting for some,” he said, getting to his feet, “but not for me. It would feel more like a tease than anything else.”

Yes, Ying could see that. She didn’t understand fully, but she could see where Li was coming from. If given the choice, she would probably prefer to know her name. Then at least she would have something to build from. But she could also see the desire to start over with a new name as a golden opportunity. If only the price wasn’t so steep.

“Tell me,” Li said, clutching Hope to his chest when she gurgled and reached for his finger again. Jet hesitated, glancing at Ying and Than significantly before looking back at Li. “I trust them,” Li said. “Jet, please, just tell me. You said yourself it wasn’t all bad.”

“Alright,” he said. “Context first,” looking directly at Zenko as he spoke. Lifting his gaze back to Li he said, ‘Mushi is your uncle, but ‘Mushi’ isn’t his name. From what I’ve been able to gather, you traveled with him for a while. Do you have a blue and white mask by any chance?”

“How do you know about that?” Li murmured, leaning slightly away from Jet.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Jet muttered. Louder, he continued, “At some point, you saved the Avatar’s life with just your dao blades while wearing that mask. Most people think you’re a non-bender because you never firebent as the Blue Spirit.”
“The who?” Li asked frowning in confusion. He didn’t miss the startle look Than was giving him.

“A vigilante who’s rather popular with the Earth Kingdom,” Jet said with a wry grin. “He’s also wanted by the Fire Nation as a traitor, dead or alive.”

Li blanched, one hand holding Hope close as if to hide the already hidden scar on his chest.

“Your sister tried to kill you twice that Mushi knew of.” Jet paused. “Well, twice that he **now** knows of. He was in the ghost town where you were wounded, Li. He just never saw you. He didn’t know you were there and the only two people who did were,” he held up one finger, “a twelve-year-old who was fighting for his life and,” he lifted a second finger, “the bitch who did that to you in the first place,” he pointed at Li’s chest.

“You know who did that?” Than demanded.

Jet nodded grimly. “And who did that,” he said, nodding to the scar on Li’s face. “I didn’t get the full story, but… Your dad gave you that,” he stared at Li’s left eye, “and your sister gave you that,” he dropped his gaze to Li’s chest.

What? Horrified, Ying covered her mouth with her hands. Than tightened his hold on her and reached out to squeeze a shell-shocked Li’s shoulder.

“What kind of monster would do such a thing?” Ying gasped.

“No one who deserves to be called a father,” Than growled.

“We all already hate him,” Jet said, looking directly into Li’s eyes. “He’s probably the most hated person in the entire world. Ying, Than, you can’t tell anyone who Li is. If anyone finds out, it’s a death sentence. The Earth Kingdom will kill him to get rid of his father’s heir and the Fire Nation will kill him for committing treason.”

“They won’t tell,” Li whispered and Ying nodded.

“I need to hear it from them,” Jet said firmly.

“I trust them.”

“And I trust you,” Jet said. “But I still want to hear it from them.”

“I will not endanger my boy,” Ying said, her soft eyes gleaming fiercely.

“Li may not be my nephew by blood,” Than said, “but he’s my nephew by heart. He’s still my family and I won’t let anything happen to my family.”

Jet sighed and nodded. “Alright then, Li,” he said, meeting golden eyes with his own earthen brown, “remember, I knew this last night and I still wouldn’t change anything. You’re still my boyfriend and I still love you. That won’t change.”

A faint flush colored Li’s cheeks but he said nothing.

“Your name is Fire Prince Zuko, brother of Fire Princess Azula, son of Fire Lord Ozai, and nephew of General Iroh, the Dragon of the West.”

...what...
Panic

Chapter Summary

In which Li is but is not Zuko, Than tries to reconcile a danger from a loved one, and Master Xiu is doomed to never sleep. He's mostly okay with that.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you for all the prayers, thoughts, good vibes, and well wishes for my Dad y'all. I'm not kidding. It was really touch-and-go there for a while. He's recovering well, is thoroughly drugged up for the pain, and lucid when he's not loopy and/or sleepy. The doctors are impressed at his rate of recovery. They seriously think Dad could have died on the operating table had he not been as healthy as he was. It wasn't anyone's fault. It was just one of those things that can happen sometimes.

But Dad's okay now. He was joking around and actually got up to go to the bathroom today. They think he'll be able to go home on Tuesday. Y'all. That's incredible. I'm in a fabulous mood because of that. ^_^

Silence. The quiet was just… so loud. It rang in his ears. There was a drum too. It was distant and unsteady, but it seemed to be constant. Like thunder that just wouldn't stop. Strange. There wasn’t a thunderstorm nearby. He would know. The air always made him feel tingly and energized when there was a storm nearby.

He didn’t feel energized right now. He felt tired actually. He shouldn’t be tired. He slept well last night. Yesterday had been a very long day and Jet wore him out last night. …why did that not bother him? He should be blushing like an idiot right now. He wasn’t. Why?

His chest hurt. Like when he woke up after she blasted him. He could see her face. Right there. He knew her. How had he not recognized her before? He had dreamed about her without ever knowing her name. The girl he knew and feared and loved.

Azula.

He missed her. He… wasn’t afraid of her. He knew he should be afraid of her. But he wasn’t. Not right now. Right now he was just tired.

She had attacked him. He could remember… But it hadn’t been in the ghost town where he first woke up. It was on a ship. She shot lightning from her fingertips.

He vaguely knew that should terrify him beyond words. But it didn’t. He couldn’t even find enough energy to be impressed. He could barely find the energy to breathe let alone be impressed.

Oh. Huh. Maybe that was why his chest was hurting. He should probably fix that. He took a deep breath through his nose, held it for three seconds, then let it all out in a sigh.
What was that sound? It sounded like a rumble.

Something squeezed his finger -oh yeah, he forgot he had hands, weird- and he looked down. A baby. Why was he holding a baby? Hope. Her name was Hope. Why was he holding Hope? Ying should be holding her. Ying was her mother.

He missed his mother. She left him behind. Why? What had he done to make her leave? Why didn’t she stay? Why didn’t she take him with her?

“…okay… Li?”

What… Who…?

He looked up. Why did his head feel heavy? Actually, heavy wasn’t quite the right word. Foggy? Fuzzy? Disoriented? Confused? All of those? Ish?

Why did Jet look concerned? Was he okay? He was talking really fast. It was kind of hard to follow.

“Li,” he heard Jet say. “Can you hear me?”

Why did Jet’s voice sound like it was coming from far away or muffled like through a pillow? Like that time he couldn’t breathe…

“Yes,” he heard himself answer. It felt weird to talk. It was as if it wasn’t him talking, but someone else talking through him.

Something touched his arms and pins and needles stabbed him under his skin. It felt wrong and he didn’t like it. Make it stop. He shifted away from the contact, only for it to grip tighter. Let go. Let go!

Why wouldn’t the touch go away? Every time he thought he had shaken it off, the contact moved somewhere else. His wrists. His shoulders. His shirt. His face!

“You will learn respect, and suffering will be your teacher.”

No! Make it stop! Please make it stop!

He flinched back from the contact, clutching little Hope to his chest. Why was he still holding her? Ying should be holding her. Li shouldn’t be holding her. Li was… Li wasn’t Li. He was Zuko. Zuko was his name. Zuko was the son of the Fire Lord. Zuko shouldn’t be holding Hope.

Li wasn’t here. Zuko was here. Zuko wasn’t Than’s nephew. Zuko didn’t belong here. This was Ba Sing Se. Zuko was the Fire Prince. Zuko was a threat here.

Huh. Why was he thinking of himself in third person? And why was he still being touched?!

Flinching back, he ended up stumbling and rolling his ankle. It stung for a moment, and then it faded like the muffled voices. Zuko wasn’t- He wasn’t safe here. He should leave. He needed to leave. But Hope. He couldn’t take her with him. She wasn’t his. However much he wished she was.

The touching came back. It felt like someone was grabbing him through a thick blanket that stabbed and itched and he wanted it to stop! He ducked, curling protectively around little Hope and staggered back further away from the touching until something hit his back.
He was trapped.

He couldn’t run. He had to run away. He just needed to breathe. He felt strangely light and twitchy like lightning was coursing through his veins. It didn’t burn, just tingled and buzzed and made him slightly disoriented and light-headed.

He remembered…

“Everything I’ve done, I’ve done to protect you.”


Azula. Azula! Sister. Sister? …what… Why did he feel like he needed to… He was so confused and everything felt fuzzy and distant and cold. It was Spring. It shouldn’t be this cold. He shouldn’t be this cold.

He had been colder before. Ice. He remembered ice. Above him. Below him. All around him. He couldn’t escape, he couldn’t breathe! No. No, before that. Ice and water. He’d swum through water that felt like liquid ice and eked every bit of heat from his body until he could barely even shiver and everything hurt. Like it did now, only then it burned too. Burned like fire.

Like the blazing fist that melted away half of his face. He could almost see the person behind the fist. Almost. He didn’t want to. He didn’t want to. He wanted to forget. To forget!

Oh the irony. He laughed. He knew he shouldn’t be laughing but now that he was, he couldn’t stop. It wasn’t funny. It was hysterical.

He was panicking. His heart was pounding his chest as if its sole purpose was to break his ribs and explode out. His lungs hurt and he just couldn’t get enough air no matter how deeply or how quickly he gasped. Vaguely, he knew he had to slow down, to focus on breathing correctly, but he couldn’t breathe and he was panicking and he still felt so detached what was wrong with him?!

Someone was talking but it was too fast -too fast!- and he couldn’t follow and something was blocking out the sun -Agni?!- and everything tingled and his head ached and he didn’t want to know!

“Li.”

That voice.

“Li, can you hear me?”

It wasn’t threatening. It was safe. But it was only safe for Li. And he wasn’t Li. Was he? He couldn’t be. He was Zuko. But he was also Li. Which was… He was Zuko first. But he didn’t want to be Zuko. Zuko was dangerous. Zuko was the Fire Prince. Zuko was evil and Fire and the son of the Fire Lord!

Li was no one. Li was a refugee with no memories. Li had friends. Zuko… didn’t. Zuko had been killed, but survived, and was wanted by the Fire Lo- by his father dead or alive.

That’s why Azula tried to kill him. Agni, she had killed him. Azula killed Zuko, but created Li. Zuko was the Fire Prince, the heir. Li wasn’t. Li couldn’t be. Would that stop her? Would Li be safe from Azula?
He was having trouble keeping his thoughts straight. Azula. Azula was important. Something about… He didn’t know or remember, he just... He knew there was something important. Whenever he thought of her name, her face, he knew there was something important that he needed to do. Something important he needed to tell her.

Fire. Think Li. It had something to do with her fire. Agni what was it? Her fire. Agni, help him know. Agni please! It was burning him alive! And he was still so cold.

This was familiar. Than had learned to recognize the signs of a panic attack since Li- Zuko had first fallen into their lives. He was still trying to process that. Li, the young man who helped guide him and his wife safely through the Si Wong Desert and who doted on their daughter. Even now, Li- Zuko was protecting Hope from Jet’s frantic grabbing.

Zenko was whining and crying, her eerie blue eyes open and fixed on Li. Zuko. Than couldn’t hear her voice, but he was sure she was trying her best to reach Zuko and failing. Or maybe she was getting through but he was ignoring her. Doubtful, but given the state Zuko was in, Than wouldn’t completely disbelieve it.

Placing a restraining hand on Jet’s shoulder, Than tugged the boy back and stepped forward. Ying could keep Jet occupied while Than tried to break… Zuko out of his panic attack. When they first met, it had been Ying’s soothing presence and gentle words that had ultimately broken through Zuko’s panic and eased him back to a somewhat calm mind.

“Zuko?” he tried softly. The flinch and widening of the boy’s already wild eyes told him all he needed. So he tried again. “Li? Are you alright?” he asked.

He could barely make out the thin gold iris around the impossibly wide black pupil. Zuko was gasping and his cheeks were unnaturally pale. Beads of sweat were forming along his hairline and tears were spilling down his cheeks as he continued laughing hysterically. Zenko was stuffing her nose between Li’s arms and his scratching fingernails. Judging from how hard Li was scratching, Than suspected there would be a few red welts under those sleeves later.

Yet no matter how terrible he looked, and Zuko looked awful, the boy was still holding Hope ever so gently. Even lost in a panic attack, there was enough of Li in Zuko to cradle the baby like a fragile piece of glass. It was endearing and spoke volumes of the heart hidden beneath emotional and physical scars.

Still, this had to stop.

“Ying,” Than said, keeping his voice low and calm, “he needs a healer.”

“Why won’t he answer me?” Jet cried, trying to push past Ying’s protective arms to reach his boyfriend. “It worked last time. Why isn’t it working now?”

He sounded frantic and Than didn’t blame him. But he did need Jet to change his tone.

“He’s had a panic attack before?” Than heard Ying ask. “Jet?”

“Yeah. When we were in the library a few days ago,” Jet said.

“I see,” Than said gently, sitting calm and still in plain view of Zuko’s wide, terrified gaze. “Jet, how fast can you run?”

“Do you know where the nearest healing clinic is?” Than asked, holding Zuko’s gaze calmly. He wasn’t sure if Zuko could actually see right now, but he hoped something could reach the boy.

“Y-yes,” Jet said, sounding more confident. “Roulan’s place. I can be there in a couple minutes flat.”

“Good. Go and get a healer here as fast as you can,” Than said, controlling his tone so there was no fear for Zuko to pick up on. “Hurry. He’s not breathing deep enough. He could lose consciousness if he doesn’t start breathing correctly.”

That galvanized Jet into action. The boy took off without so much as a wave, darting across the courtyard and out the complex door. Than listened but never looked away from Li- Zuko’s wide eyes. He felt his wife’s hand rest on his shoulder and took a deep, steadying breath. This wasn’t going to be easy.

When he thought of the Fire Lord, his mind usually conjured up some inhuman monster ruling from a distance. The figure with no face who sat on his throne and just threw wave after wave of firebenders and soldiers and pain and suffering at Than and his home. He was aware the Fire Lord had an heir, but he never really thought about it except to accept that there would one day be yet another evil firebender on the Fire Nation’s throne.

But Li… Li was not the Fire Lord. Li wasn’t evil. He was probably the exact opposite of evil. He made mistakes, he panicked over a kiss, he cried when Than and Ying hugged him at Hope’s birth, and he loved Hope. Than didn’t know Zuko, but he knew Li. And Li was panicking.

“IT’s o-” No. It wasn’t okay and Li knew it. Try something else. “Li, it’s Than. Can you hear me?”

Li’s breathless cackles eased but Than didn’t like how much fear was still visible in Li’s eyes. He reached out to rub Li’s shoulders, stopping himself mid-motion when he remembered how badly Li had reacted to touch earlier. Withdrawing his hand, Than sighed and began petting Zenko’s fur instead. The fox Spirit was beside herself with worry.

Ying knelt next to him and rubbed his back in encouragement. “He’s listening,” she said gently. “He can hear you. Just keep calling him.”

“I’m not…” Than sighed as his mind went over what Jet said. Li’s- Zuko’s father had been the one to burn his face so badly. “I’m not sure if I should be the one to do this,” he said, feeling his shoulders sink in weary resignation. “His own father-”

“You aren’t his father,” Ying said, pressing a kiss to his temple. “And for once, I think that’s a good thing. Just talk to him and breathe with him. I’ll be right here.”

Ying was a blessing Than thanked Oma and Shu for every day. With her steady presence, Than took a deep breath and began working on calming a child of Agni.

Since the Dai Li pulled the body out of the well, the severity of the patients’ symptoms had noticeably gone down. There were no more dangerously ill patients who required constant supervision to be sure they didn’t die. It would take time for them to recover completely, but that was time Roulan was fully prepared to help them through. Master Xiu had stayed up all through the night bending his way through each patient, only snagging a few hours of sleep from naps here
and there when Roulan and GuoGuo sat on him.

She sat back and dried her hands with the nearest clean hand towel she could find. Looking around, she took the opportunity to check on her fellow healers. Little Tang was yawning but awake and aware enough to keep working but GuoGuo was blinking and bleary eyed. Master Xiu, however, had no business being awake and he damn well knew it.

With a huff of frustration, Roulan got to her feet and stalked over to the Master Healer and smacked him upside the head. She ignored the pained whine her abuse elicited in favor of shooting the waterbender her best glare. His dark blue eyes lifted to hers blearily.


Master Xiu may outrank her in raw talent and studies, but she had him in the ditch when it came to age. He lasted a few seconds before wilting and staggering to his feet. She didn’t miss the wobble in his stance as he yawned hugely and stretched.

“Is the couch free?” he asked, sleep slurring his words.

Roulan nodded. “It is. Now go make sure it isn’t free before I drag you there by your ears,” she threatened.

Xiu ducked his head and rubbed his neck and he slunk away. He didn’t dare cross her. He knew she would make good on all of her threats. She always did.

So when the front door burst open, drawing the attention of every conscious person and a few previously unconscious people in the clinic, she seriously considered chasing the newcomer off with her broom. If it wasn’t serious, they could wait.

“Roulan!”

“Jet?” the healer gasped, turning to the young man staggering in through the door.

A quick once over made it clear the boy was out of breath from a good dash, but otherwise apparently healthy. Why would-

“We need your help,” Jet said, swallowing to wet his dry mouth. “It’s Li. He’s having a panic attack and we can’t get him ou-”


Jet waved her words aside with a careless swipe of his hand. “He got out,” he gasped. “Long story. We need your help. Please. It’s important.”

“Friend of yours?” Master Xiu asked casually.

“I will hit you if you aren’t in that couch in five seconds, Master Xiu,” Roulan growled. “I’ll handle this.” To Jet, she said, “Is he hurting himself?” If he was, then she would need to grab something to sterilize the wounds. “What triggered it, do you know?”

“I-I can’t…” Jet choked and shook his head, running his hands through his messy hair. “I promised, I- Ah fuck! He has amnesia and I think he’s remembering and it’s partly my fault and I am going to fucking murder his father and that Spirits-accursed sister of his. I will rip them all apart. Starting with his father.”
Amnesia? Then the headaches… Damn, this could be worse than she thought. Better to err on the side of too much rather than too little then.

“I’ll go with you.”

She held up a finger to argue, then shut her mouth and groaned. She couldn’t think of a decent argument to keep the Master Healer from coming. She could heal the physical wounds and could handle the physical manifestations of mental and emotional trauma. But dealing with the internal mind was not something she was useful in. That was generally a waterbender’s forte.

“Fine,” she hissed. “But you are going to sleep all day today. GuoGuo!” she called.

“Yes?” the other Journeyman Healer replied, lifting her head from where she was cleaning a dirty rag.

“Can you handle this place with Little Tang for a few hours?” she asked.

GuoGuo blinked and looked around at the patients, cataloguing what was needed and what wasn’t. After a minute, she nodded. “We’ll be fine.”

“Good.” Shoudering her travel bag, Roulan following Jet out the door. “Now, Jet, do you know where Li is right now?” He nodded frantically, practically twitching in his urgency to go back to Li. Roulan sighed. “Then lead on. Keep up Master, or I’m leaving you behind.”

The waterbender chortled. “I believe it.”
Morning Tension

Chapter Summary

In which Master Xiu really needs a cup of tea, Jet gets a hug, and Tengfei is having a interesting morning.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for the delay. Dad's back from the hospital and hobbling around on a walker with wheels, I successfully moved, and finished half of my thesis. I've been productive! Thus why I'm allowing myself the chance to finally do some fun writing~ Missed y'all bunches.

Side note: I am slightly offended by the fact I couldn't think of a good sexy-punny title for this chapter. It's chapter 69 and 'Morning Tension' was all I could come up with that pertended to the chapter itself. -_-;

Jet ran like Koh himself was on his tail. The brief pauses in his gait to look over his shoulder at the two healers following him were frequent only from worry. He knew they would follow him as far as he led them, but his anxiety demanded he keep checking. The irrational fear that Roulan and Master Ye Xiu would vanish if he didn't look back was roiling just beneath his conscious mind.

Li. Zuko. Li. Damn it, Jet could care less which name his boyfriend chose to go with. He just wanted Li to stay. If he’d known Li would react this badly to discovering his true identity… He would probably have still told him. Maybe if he was still back in his tree house home, he wouldn’t have. But now…

No use crying over spilled wine. Just clean up the mess and pour another cup. Jet was doing what he could. Once Roulan and Master Xiu arrived, they would help snap Li out of this panic attack. Was it wrong that that thought, no matter how stupid and irrational it was, made Jet feel wickedly jealous? Probably. He would never wish Li to stuffer like he was. But knowing Jet couldn’t do anything to help just made him feel… useless.

Jet hated feeling useless. Useless was too much like helpless. Like when those Fire Nation mercenaries destroyed his first home or when his Freedom Fighters kicked him out of his second home. Granted, in the back of his mind, he knew this wasn’t as bad as those times, but it certainly felt like it right now.

He rounded the corner, pushing himself when he saw the potter complex loom ahead on his right. The door was open and Jet barely managed to slow down enough to keep from overshooting and slamming full force into the doorjamb. Darting inside, he was forced to duck away from curious potters who were busy at their wheels or carrying their wares to the stalls.

The courtyard was fairly busy at this time of the morning. Most of the potters who had their own stalls had gathered their wares and were gone for the day. Those who spent most of their time
working the clay were seated at their wheels or managing the two active kilns. It was off putting to see people go about their day as usual despite the meltdown Jet knew his boyfriend was suffering.

It took Jet a second to locate Li. The firebender was mostly hidden from view by Than and Ying over by the bath house. No wonder the other potters hadn’t noticed anything wrong. If Jet didn’t know better, he wouldn’t have noticed anything wrong at all. Than must have calmed Li down enough to stop laughing. That was something.

“This way,” he said, not bothering to look over his shoulder at the healers.

Quickly, he made his way through the crowd towards Than and Ying. The closer he got, the more clearly he could see Li’s face. The whites of Li’s eyes were still too visible for Jet’s taste, but Li did seem somewhat calmer. The baby was still in his arms too.

Someone brushed past him and Roulan dropped to her knees by Ying’s side, her no-nonsense green eyes fixed on Li’s face.

“How long has he been like this?” Roulan demanded in a curt voice as Master Xiu crouched down next to her.

“A few minutes,” Ying said, patting her husband’s arm and turning to the two healers. She blinked in surprise when she recognized Roulan, a slight flush coloring her cheeks. “Oh, it’s you.”

Roulan snorted. “Ba Sing Se may be huge, but it really is a small world,” she said with a smirk. She jerked her head to where Li was still rubbing one of his arms. “How long has he been doing that?”

Ying followed Roulan’s gaze and sighed. “Not long,” she said. “He’s calmed down quite a bit since Than started talking to him.”

“That’s good,” Master Xiu said. “Keep his attention away from me.”

“Hm? Why?” Ying asked, her forehead creasing in confusion.

“Because I doubt he’ll be feeling particularly friendly towards water,” the healer said, uncorking a small canteen by his side much like Katara carried and streaming enough water from it to glove his hands.

Ying frowned and nodded shifting her body so she mostly blocked the waterbender from view without appearing to crowd Li in. Jet bit his lip and watched, feeling that familiar clawing sensation of uselessness return. There was nothing he could do here except wait. He never really had been a patient person.

He could hear Than’s soft murmuring voice as he talked Li through breathing exercises. Following Than’s advice, Jet took a deep breath and crouched on Than’s other side. Li’s golden eyes flashed to him, startled by his sudden appearance. For a moment, Jet froze, afraid he’d made a mistake. But then Li’s shoulders drooped further and Li’s scarred eye slowly eased back to its usual size.

Than’s shoulder nudged him gently. “Talk to him,” the potter said gently, keeping his voice steady and even.

Talk to him. About what? Last time, all Jet really had to do was call him and Li snapped out of it. What was there to say?

He glanced down at Li’s lap where the fox Spirit was curled. Her blue eyes were still open and she still made soft, worried sounds but she wasn’t frantic anymore. Her chin rested on Li’s arm which
was wrapped around the baby still held firmly but gently in Li’s other arm. That position must be uncomfortable for Li’s arm. Why was he…

Oh. Hope was hold his finger. Jet huffed a smile. Of course the only person completely unconcerned would be little Hope. The baby was happily suckling away at Li’s finger which she now held with both of her tiny hands.

“She really likes you, you know,” he said.

Golden eyes narrowed ever so slightly in confusion.

“Hope,” Jet said, nodding to the child. “She likes you. She’s not afraid of you.”

Li flinched and Jet knew he hit the heart of the matter.

“I’m not afraid of you either,” he said. Yeah, he could see tears now. “Neither are Than or Ying,” Jet added. “Remember what I said? I knew last night and it didn’t change anything.”

Heh. Li could still blush even like this. Good thing too. Li tended to miss things when he got flustered. The last thing they needed was for him to notice the waterbender moving water gloved hands closer to his head. Thank the Spirits Master Xiu was on Li’s scarred side.

“And this morning,” Jet continued, holding Li’s full attention. “In the bath house.” Li gulped and Jet smirked. “It still didn’t change anything. I don’t care what name you had or who you were.”

Slowly, taking care to make every move visible to his boyfriend, to give Li every chance to avoid him, Jet reached out and pressed his fingers against the mark he knew was still there on his boyfriend’s neck. The strain around Li’s eyes eased just as fast as the blush bloomed in his cheeks.

Jet smiled and rubbed his fingers over the hidden mark. “You’re still my boyfriend,” he said.

The beginnings of a smile began to twitch at Li’s lips, then water gloved hands pressed against his temples. Li tensed, his eyes flying open in shock. Jet saw it before it happened and reacted on instinct. He dove forward, looping his arms around Li’s neck, and held on. Li’s breath burned the side of Jet’s throat-

Then Li slumped still and silent in his arms. Jet opened his eyes -when had he closed them?- and saw Master Xiu rubbing soothing, watery circles over Li’s temples. A frown worked its way onto the waterbender’s face while hands lingered there for a few seconds before drifting down. Jet watched the soft glow ebb in the water gloves as Master Xiu’s hands settled on Li’s back between his shoulder blades. In his arms, Jet felt Li’s breathing slow and deepen to the healthy rhythm of a sleeper with each circle of the waterbender’s gloved hands.

Finally, the water healer withdrew his hands and sighed. He streamed the water back into his canteen and corked it while Roulan stepped in. For the first time all morning, Jet really looked at Master Xiu. The man was exhausted.

“Thank you,” the waterbender said wearily, meeting Jet’s eyes briefly.

Confused, Jet blinked. “For what?”

“Benders often bend when they experience high emotion like fear,” Master Xiu said. “Normally, I prefer to simply help the patient work through their panic by easing their distress down to tolerable levels,” the waterbender said, running a hand through his messy black hair. “I don’t usually knock them out unless they become a danger to themselves or others. Granted,” he added, meeting Jet’s
gaze and lifting an eyebrow significantly, “most of my patients can’t just create their element out of thin air. A solid wood room and only my water present is usually enough to stop most bending patients.”

Oh. Right. The healer knew Li was a firebender.

"Make room," Roulan ordered.

Jet sat back so he could lean his boyfriend’s unconscious body against the bath house wall where Roulan could work on him. He kept one arm looped around his boyfriend's shoulders though, unwilling to let go. Ying leaned over and scooped a gurgling Hope from Li’s limp hands, working Li’s finger free of the baby’s grasp. When Hope lost all contact with the firebender, she began crying and reaching out to him.

“Let me know what happens,” Ying said, gripping her husband’s shoulder. “I’ll be over there,” she nodded to the low wall by the middle kiln, “if you need me.”

Than nodded and pressed a kiss to his wife’s hand. “I will,” he said softly, earning him a tender smile.

“Jet?” Ying said, turning to him. “Thank you.”

She ruffled Jet’s hair, startling him before moving away so Hope’s cries didn’t wake Li from his waterbent slumber.

“Well that’s a nasty piece of work,” Roulan grumbled, drawing Jet’s attention back to his unconscious boyfriend. The herbalist had undone the top two frog knots near Li’s shirt collar and was staring at the top edges of the burn mark there.

“His sister did that,” Jet said.

“His sister?” Roulan hissed in furious disbelief. She snorted. “No wonder he ran.”

“Do you need me to carry him to your clinic?” Than offered, but Roulan was already shaking his head.

“No,” she said. “Even if we had room right now, I’d rather not do that.”

“We have a number of patients who are still sick,” Master Xiu said, rubbing his face with his palms tiredly. “It’s not contagious, but I doubt waking up to unpleasant smells is the best thing for him right now.”

“You have a garden in the back,” Jet said suddenly, finding himself the center of attention. “He likes the sun. It could help him.”

Surprisingly, the waterbender nodded in understanding. “We can do that,” he said, glancing at the herbalist. “The patio is free and clean.”

“I suppose,” Roulan said with a shrug. “Besides, there isn’t much we can do for him right now except keep him calm and comfortable. I can—”

“I’ll work on soothing the distress from his mind,” the waterbender said. “But I’m tired and I think my Journeyman might hit me a good one if I don’t catch some sleep.”

“You bet I will, Old Ye,” Roulan grumbled.
Than chuckled at Master Xiu’s put upon sigh. “Thank you,” he said gratefully. “Would it be a bother if Ying and I took turns sitting with him?”

“Fine by me,” Roulan said, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “So long as you stay out of our way and you won’t get in trouble for missing work,” she nodded to the other potters who were beginning to notice their activity, “then it shouldn’t be a problem. Xiu?”

The waterbender groaned and waved dismissively. “I’d rather have a barrier between me and a frightened firebender,” he said just loudly enough for their group to hear. Than sucked in a startled breath but Xiu waved him back. “Calm down. I’ve known since yesterday. Besides, even if I hadn’t known then, I would have found out rather painfully if Jet hadn’t kept his friend from lashing out.”

Without waiting for a response, the waterbender got to his feet and stretched hugely. “I’ll go on back to the clinic,” he said.

“Stop by Pao’s place and get a cup of chamomile tea, please,” Roulan called. “I’ll know if you don’t.”

Ye Xiu, Master Healer and waterbender in charge of the Autumn Leaf Clinic, positively wilted. “You are a slave driver,” he muttered, slinking away.

He must have had a well-developed sixth sense, because the instant Roulan shot a glare at his back, he picked up his speed and fled out of the complex. Jet snickered despite himself.

“Ignore him,” Roulan said, standing and brushing herself off. “I’ll take you to the clinic, on one condition.” She looked directly at Than. “I need to know his medical history. Everything you know. If we’re to take care of him efficiently, then we need to know what can trigger his panic attacks, where previous injuries are, and,” she glared at Jet, “what happened to him while he was paying a visit to our unnamed friends. Is that clear?”

Grimly, Than nodded. Jet, however, hesitated.

“I don’t know what happened to him in there,” Jet said seriously. “But I know some people who do. They were there too. One of them is hurt. We left him and a friend with a healer up in the Upper Ring last night. Hey Zenko,” he said. The fox didn’t look at him from where she was still curled in Li’s lap, but one of her ears twitched in his direction. “Stay with him. If he wakes up before I get back, tell him I’m checking on Jin and Shanyuan.”

The fox sneezed and Jet stood.

:There’s a Dai Li on the roof.: 

Tengfei? No, Zenko would have said that. Just a random agent then. Well, well. Slight detour first then.

He pressed a kiss to Li’s sweat-damp black hair before sliding his arm free and standing. Leaving Li behind like this went against Jet’s grain, but he knew his boyfriend. The moment Li was awake and calm, he would be asking after Jin and Shanyuan. Jet might as well have some answers for him.

But first- 

“Hey Ying?” he called.
Soft, motherly brown eyes settled on him. “How is he?” Ying asked, leaning around Jet to see her husband gathering Li up in his arms to carry him after Roulan.

“He should be fine,” Jet said. “Master Xiu's going to get tea at Pao's place before heading on to the clinic. They said it'd be fine if you and Than took turns sitting with him.”

Ying's gaze softened in worry. "I see," she murmured thoughtfully. "I suppose I could do with a cup of tea myself."

Jet chuckled, then hung his head. "Look," he muttered, "I need to go check on our friends. Li and I were going to go together but...” He bit his lip, needing something to chew on.

“It’s okay. I understand,” Ying said, tucking Hope in the crook of one arm and standing so she could pat Jet’s face with her free hand. “Thank you.”

Damn, this was all just… Jet was not used to this kind of affection. He hadn’t had it in so long, he’d almost forgotten what it felt like. Li had no idea how lucky he was that it had been Than and Ying who’d found him and not someone else. Anyone else. Spirits, Jet probably wouldn’t have been ready to meet him yet.

“Oh Jet.”

Hm? Wha- **Huh?!**

He tensed in surprise when he suddenly found himself wrapped in a hug. Ying’s free arm was wrapped securely around Jet’s back. They were close enough that Jet felt Ying’s chin and Hope’s gurgling body press against his chest. It was intimate in a way he remembered his mother’s hugs had been. It hurt too.

“Shh,” Ying whispered in a soothing tone.

That just made it worse. Spirits, Jet was thoroughly screwed. First Li in all his adorable, could-kill-him-in-sixty-seven-different-ways, blushiness and now Ying with all of her mothering. Jet never stood a chance.

Ying wasn’t his mother. His mind knew that. But right now, she felt like his mother. So he hugged her. There may have been tears involved too. He would deny it later. Unless Li asked. Then he might not. He’d probably cry again though. Crying gave him a headache.

He heard somewhere that holding back and not crying when the body needed it would cause a build-up of pent up emotions. Then, when the person finally did cry, the body would release as much of that emotion all at once. Like a cry deficit or something stupid like that. Roulan would probably know.

Crap. He must be seriously upset to be rambling like this. Breathe, stupid idiot. He tucked his head in Ying shoulder -she was so much shorter than he was- and wrapped his arms around her loosely. She wasn’t his mother. She didn’t feel right or smell right or talk right. But she was a mother and she was what he needed.

“You did well, Jet,” Ying murmured, patting his back and letting him step back when he was ready. “I do have something I need to tell you, though.”

Oh boy.

Ying patted his arm and Jet prepared himself for the worst. What was the worst? She smiled. Oh
“If you ever break my boy’s heart,” -Jet tensed- “I will make you find a shovel” -he gulped- “and watch you dig your own grave.”

He was terrified.

She smiled and Jet shuddered.

The world was going topsy-turvy. Tengfei had no idea what to make of anything anymore. It couldn’t be true. Everything was fine. Mostly. Honestly. He didn’t contact his fellow Dai Li for one night to make sure his water-for-brains Apprentice survived the night and when he came back nothing made sense!

The worst part was that no one else seemed to fully comprehend what was happening either. He was fairly certain it wasn’t an assassination, failed or successful. No one was panicking enough for that. It wasn’t a scandal because no one was gossiping more than usual in the darker corners of the palace. It couldn’t be an outright attack either because there wasn’t any blood or bodies or screams. It was actually eerily calm, relatively speaking anyway.

Although, the palace courtyard had looked like it was in dire need of repair. And those doors there seemed a bit worse for wear. Odd. Had one of the Palace Guards’ practice sparring sessions gotten a little out of hand again? Couldn’t be.

What, by Yu Huang’s blessed Jade Throne, happened last night?

He couldn’t just ask though. The Dai Li were Ba Sing Se’s elite secret guard. Everyone knew the Dai Li knew everything. It took more self-control than it should have for Tengfei not to groan aloud and roll his eyes. He doubted Shanyuan would have been able to resist at least rolling his eyes.

Shanyuan. All amusement vanished as quickly as it had come. His ridiculous Apprentice was part of the reason why Tengfei was here in the first place. He had to report the situation to Long Feng as soon as possible. The sole agent at the substation Tengfei had left Honqi at last night promised to pass the word that the criminal responsible for the Woman-in-White-turned-Kuchisake-onna’s appearance had been dealt with. But Tengfei was no closer to finishing off the Kuchisake-onna herself than he’d been last night and there was no way on earth he was going to attempt something that insane all on his own. He wasn't stupid.

He did wonder why Li and Jet had both been conspicuously missing when he'd finally made it back to the Yan household last night. Those boys attracted trouble like candles attracted moths. Li in particular.

Or was it Zuko now? Tengfei had quite a few questions for that boy. Shanyuan hadn’t been in a state to answer anything and Jin had been so tight lipped Tengfei had been grudgingly impressed. She could prove to be a promising informant yet. Their whole group could actually. Spirits knew they were just as prone to getting into trouble as getting out of it.

Jin had been captured by the Dai Li right along with Li, after all, and they both somehow escaped relatively unscathed. Tengfei suspected his Apprentice and the Kuchisake-onna both had something to do with that. Although, again, Shanyuan couldn’t say much in his condition. Jin
wasn’t talking, Jet hadn’t been captured, and both Li and Jet were gone.

A terrible thought occurred to him then and he froze midstride. Dear Yu Huang. What if Li and Jet went to deal with the Kuchisake-onna on their own? The Knowledge Seeker should be able to shield them from the worst of it, but one Knowledge Seeker, even one with four tails, was no match for a fully enraged Kuchisake-onna. Tengfei sent up a quick, heartfelt prayer to not find their bodies somewhere. He was actually starting to like them.

Even that ridiculously mischievous Knowledge Seeker.

“What do you mean he’s gone?”

Hm? General How?

“I-I mean he’s gone, sir. He went away.”

Tengfei surreptitiously stepped closer to the nearest wall, pressing his back against stone and holding himself perfectly still. He didn’t recognize the other speaker, but judging by their clothes and manner of speaking, the young man was probably just a palace servant. Though why the leader of the Council of Five would lower himself to speaking directly to a servant, Tengfei didn’t know. But damned if he wasn’t curious.

Oh dear, the servant boy’s reply apparently hadn't been what General How was looking for. Tengfei narrowed his eyes, the only evidence of his internal wince, at the sound of the general’s open hand striking the servant’s face. Whoever was missing must be important if it could push the notoriously even tempered general over the edge to fury.

Tengfei loved his city and, unlike the Earth King, was well aware of the continuing war on the other side of the Outer Wall. All of the Dai Li were aware of it. It was impossible not to be. Long Feng may have commanded them to keep the citizens of Ba Sing Se from speaking of the continuing war, but the Grand Secretariat could not afford to silence the Council of Five.

The Grand Secretariat and the Council of Five had a tenuous agreement by necessity. The Dai Li, under Long Feng’s command, kept the city safe from the Spiritual and particularly nasty Human activity. Meanwhile, the City Guard, many of whom were once soldiers on the Outer Wall, and the Earth Army answered to the Council of Five. The City Guard dealt with the typical Human crimes inherent to many people living in close quarters and the Army protected Ba Sing Se from the Fire Nation beyond the Wall. It was a delicate balance of power that no one dared to disturb.

But Long Feng closely monitored any interactions the Council of Five had with the Earth King. Especially those of General How who was notoriously loyal to the Earth King alone. Tengfei had observed more than a few such interactions throughout his career. Never in any of his observations had he ever seen General How lose his cool like this before. It was strangely off-putting and out of character.

Had one of the Council of Five gone missing? That would certainly explain the confusion in the palace, and why no one was gossiping about it. One of the quickest ways to find oneself vanished was to openly talk about the vanished. But Tengfei hadn’t heard any whispers from his fellow agents about plans to vanish any of the generals.

Come to think of it, Tengfei hadn’t seen any signs of Dai Li presence in the palace since he’d arrived. Why hadn’t he realized that sooner? Damn it. This was bad. He was missing something important and had no way of finding out what it was and he still couldn’t bear to leave Shanyuan alone for much longer. He knew his Apprentice was safe with Jin and the Yan family, but he still
felt the insatiable need to actually be there.

He sighed wearily. He had enough on his plate as it was. He would find out who had been vanished eventually. He needed to find a fellow agent or, better yet, Long Feng. Swallowing back his curiosity, Tengfei stepped away from the wall began walking back the way he came.

“You! Dai Li! Halt!”

*Excuse me?*

Well, well. The general was both furious *and* bold. What an unusual combination. Deciding to indulge the general, because he *was* still curious, Tengfei stopped where he was and half turned to look back at the tableau he’d intended to leave behind. The servant boy was petrified where he stood, his light brown eyes fixed on Tengfei. Wise boy. Fear for self-preservation kept many an innocent from making stupid decisions. Pity General How chose to ignore that fear.

Speaking of the general, the man stalked down the hall towards Tengfei. The general was built like a boulder; tall, muscular, and stern of face and bearing. Everything a high ranking earthbending soldier was expected to be. Perhaps the sight of such a man approaching would unnerve most people. But Tengfei was Dai Li and, quite frankly, there wasn’t much that could scare him as badly as discovering his beloved city was in the clutches of a Kuchisake-onne. Or watching as his Apprentice was struck by a swiftly bent boulder and slammed through a wall and knowing there was nothing he could do to stop it.

“What have you done to him?” the general demanded, his dark eyes flashing.

Tengfei tilted his head slightly. “You’ll have to be more specific,” he said simply.

The general gritted his teeth and surprised Tengfei yet again by grabbing the fabric of his tunic near the collar and yanking him up to his toes. Well then.

“Don’t play games with me, Dai Li,” the general growled. “I have no patience for it.”

While Tengfei was less than pleased to be balanced on the balls of his feet, he was maddeningly intrigued. He was already formulating a response with just the right amount of snark when the general’s next words shattered what was left sane in this world.

“Where is the Earth King?”
Jet grumbled as the train moved along the tracks. The train may be the fastest method of transportation in Ba Sing Se, but it was currently moving much too slow to suit him. He was twitchy and it took every ounce of concentration to not tap his foot. The angry glare he got from the older woman sitting in the chair next to him was borderline murderous and he valued his life. He just had too much energy and anxiety was eating him alive. He wanted to drop everything and go back to where Li or Zuko or whichever name his boyfriend would prefer after this -Jet was fine with both- was lying sedated in the Autumn Leaf Clinic. Roulan was stern but she was as watchful as any military scout Jet had ever met. Li would be fine. Shanyuan and Jin were the ones who needed him the most right now. If Shanyuan hadn’t made it through the night-

No. Nope. Not going to finish that thought. Shanyuan made it. Nothing else was acceptable. With any luck Tengfei had found a waterbending healer to work on Shanyuan. The internal damage the Apprentice Dai Li had suffered during the fight last night made Jet wince. He’d had a few kids get injured like that under his watch. They hadn’t made it. Granted, Jet’s troupe hadn’t had any waterbenders among them until Katara showed up either but-

Katara. Katara was a waterbender and Jet would bet money she at least knew a little bit about healing too. Even if she didn’t, Aang might. The Avatar was the master of all four elements. It was a stretch but it was worth considering.

Except for the tiny fact that Katara was much more likely to fill him with ice spikes than help him. Maybe if he explained the situation… Agh! Katara knew the basics of the situation from their spat in Roulan’s clinic yesterday and Jet was willing to bet Tengfei laid some nasty facts on her and Aang last night too. There was a slim chance she would help, but slim was better than none. Shanyuan needed the slim.

Alright Jet. Swallow the pride and think. Last night, the Avatar’s bison had been in the Middle Ring heading towards the Upper Ring. It was still early in the day now. The sun hadn’t been up in the sky for more than a couple hours. Almost half of that time Jet had been trapped in this tiny train car. Wasn’t his life just a load of bullhogshit.
Anyway, the Avatar’s gang was active and Toph was blind so daylight meant nothing to her. Hopefully they hadn’t left their home in the Upper Ring yet, but if they had, it wouldn’t be too hard to track them down. They weren’t exactly hard to find. They tended to stand out like a sore thumb wherever they went.

Right. He had a plan. That was the only good news he could think of as the train pulled into yet another station. This was the first stop in the Middle Ring and Jet felt the weight of his messenger badge in his pocket. All he would have to do is show it to any City Guard who questioned him about why he hadn’t disembarked before reaching the Upper Ring and they would leave him be. The Dai Li might be a different matter though. Flashing the badge may not be enough, but dropping Tengfei and Shanyuan’s name might not be good either. Unless it could get Shanyuan help faster. If that was the case then what in all the Spirits’ names was going on over there?

Curious, Jet leaned forward to follow the astounded expressions of the other train car passengers and was met by the oddest sight. There, sitting on a ludicrously elegant palanquin overly embellished by jade and gold was a bookish man with tiny, basically useless spectacles pinched on his nose. He was dressed as a typical Upper Ring lord, the kind that probably knew about the finer details of a tea ceremony but nothing about how to put his clothes on without help. All in all, the guy was certainly impressive -if a peacock could be called impressive- and he certainly wasn’t something the people here were used to seeing. Jet couldn’t see any other reason why everyone was so interested in the dude.

Then he saw Katara and it clicked. The people weren’t staring at the rich peacock, they were staring at the Avatar! Shit! He had to get off!

Sprinting to the train doors, he managed to slip out just as the doors slid shut behind him. He didn’t pause, he ran straight to Katara, skidding to a stop when Sokka suddenly stepped between him and the waterbender. One look at Sokka’s eyes and Jet he raised both hands and stepped back.

“Look, I don’t want to start anything,” Jet said before the Water Tribe could speak. “I promise. I need Katara’s help.”

The next second, he was surrounded by City Guards and two Dai Li because what the actual fuck?!

“Dai Li?” he gasped. Shit! What the hell was going on? Since when were the Dai Li protecting the Avatar? The sound of water streaming through the air jerked Jet’s attention back to Katara.

“What do you want, Jet?” Katara demanded.

Behind her, Toph stood calmly next to Aang. Her stance wasn’t battle ready and her sightless eyes were fixed at some point in the middle space but Jet knew she was paying very close attention to what was going on around her. Aang looked more curious and surprised than afraid and was sticking pretty close to the bookish rich guy.

Jet eased up his stance, hoping to come across as peaceful as possible. “I need your help,” he said.

Katara scoffed, but there was a hint of cautious interest in her blue eyes. “For what?” she said in a flat tone.


“Yes,” she replied carefully.

“A friend got hurt,” Jet said quickly. “Remember that Spirit we were fighting last night?”
One of the Dai Li tensed in surprise. Jet deliberately did not look at the forest green robed warrior. He was here for Katara. He needed her help. He had no way of knowing if she would help if she knew Shanyuan was a Dai Li.

“I…” Katara’s eyes were wide in remembrance but her expression was conflicted.

“Yeah, we do,” Sokka answered instead. He put away his boomerang and crossed his arms. “What happened?”

“Were you able to stop her?” Aang asked from his spot by the bookish rich guy. Seriously, who was that guy? “Did you convince her to stop hurting people?”

More like they gave her what she wanted then made sure she got the hell out. But, in a nutshell, “Basically,” Jet said. “But one of my friends got hurt. Bad. If he survived the night, he’ll need a waterbending healer to make sure he walks again.”

Toph’s eyes grew wide and she lifted her head, looking at something just to Jet’s left. “Li?” she called. “Is Li alright?”

“No,” Jet replied honestly. “He’s not. But he’s okay physically. Mostly. It’s Shanyuan, Tengfei’s apprentice.”

This time, both Dai Li stiffened. Jet didn’t need to look at them to know they recognized those names. Toph hadn’t missed the Dai Li’s movement either if the slight tilt of her head in their direction was anything to go by.

“Look,” Jet glanced around at the crowd of onlookers their odd group had gathered, “can we talk about this away from these guys? I’m fine with the Dai Li listening ‘cause they know what I’m talking about, but can we ditch Mr. Rich Peacock over there for some privacy? Talking about blood and death doesn’t usually sit well with most people. Especially aristocrats,” he added with a dry glance at the bookish rich guy.

Interestingly, both Katara and Sokka looked positively stunned and borderline mortified. Aang was staring at Jet in shock, quickly slapping a hand over his mouth. Toph didn’t even bother hiding her amusement. She planted both her fists on her hips, bent backwards, and guffawed loud and obnoxiously.

Jet really wished he had something to chew on because he got the feeling he was missing something. He glanced at the two City Guards and two Dai Li and saw the same juxtaposition of horrified amusement on their faces. Dude, what?

“I like you, Jet,” Toph declared. “But no can do. We’re on our way to the Lower Ring.” Her grin faded somewhat. “But I’m sure we can take care of things without our resident waterbender.”


“You saying you’d rather go on a tour then help heal someone?” Toph asked innocently.

Immediately, Katara’s indignation vanished, replaced by genuine worry. Her blue eyes sparkled with concern but there was still hesitation in the way she bit her lip.

“I get it,” Jet said. “You don’t like me. I don’t like you. But I’m doing this because a friend of mine is hurt bad and if he doesn’t get your help, there’s a high chance he’ll die.” Deep breath. “Heal him, and I’ll answer as many questions as I can about the Spirit and I’ll try to avoid you guys from now on. Deal?”
Th waterbender hesitated, obviously torn between wanting to help and reluctance to leave her friends, the Avatar in particular.

“Katara,” Aang said, pulling the Water Tribe’s girl’s gaze to him. “It’s okay. We can handle it from here.” He smiled. “We took care of these guys once. We can do it again.” The bald kid’s gray eyes shifted to Jet and his smile faded as he called, “One question first.”

Jet shrugged. “Shoot.”

“The Spirit you calmed-”

Don’t know about ‘calmed’ but…

“-what was her name?” Aang asked. “Maybe I can try to stop by her shrine and ask her to stay calm on our way to the Lower Ring.”

Jet was already shaking his head. “Kuchisake-onnas don’t typically have shrines,” he said curtly. “Why would people build a shrine to remember a murderer? And even if she did,” Jet forged on, despite the disgruntled City Guard -were they aware of the Kuchisake-onna?- “she wouldn’t be there. She’s gone. For good. We got rid of her.”

“You convinced her to go back to the Spirit Realm?” Aang said, his mood rising.

Jet sighed. Instead of answering Aang, he looked directly at one of the Dai Li and said, “You can pass this on to your boss man. The Kuchisake-onna’s been dealt with. Permanently. She won’t be bothering this city ever again. The man responsible for her creation was dealt with last night. If Tengfei didn’t kill him for hurting Shanyuan, then he’s probably been arrested.”

The Dai Li flinched, glanced at his partner, then pressed his lips into a grim line. A second later, he pressed his palms together in front of his chest and vanished into the stone platform beneath their feet.

“So,” Jet said, turning his attention back to Katara and the Avatar, “you comin’?”

“Interesting boy.”

Toph snickered, leaning casually against the side of the train car. “You have no idea,” she said.

“I’m a bit surprised he didn’t recognize Kuei,” Aang said from his spot at the foot of the Earth King’s palanquin. “I mean, we recognized him and we’d never seen him before.”

“Yeah, but we also got into the palace because we knew the Earth King was there,” Sokka said. “Besides, I get the feeling Kuei doesn’t get out much.”

“Oh, I don’t,” the Earth King said excitedly. “I’ve never even been outside the palace walls before.”

Toph tried not to gag. Why did the leader of her entire nation sound like he was revealing a juicy secret to them? It was like not leaving the palace walls was a point of pride. Maybe it was in Kuei’s eyes. Kuei didn’t know any better.

Still, Toph had trouble with that thought process. She was born blind. Her parents had done their
best to keep her cooped up in their family estate in Gaipan. She had no idea what she was missing but she needed to know. She had made it her personal goal to find out how many ways she could slip her guard and feel the world outside her family’s estate.

That was actually one of the many reasons why she’d chosen to travel with the Avatar and his gang. Granted, she liked Aang and she wanted to teach him earthbending and she wanted the Fire Nation stopped. Those were all true. But she also desperately wanted to just go out into the world and explore. There was so much to feel. Different types of stone, different strides and movements, different everything! It was all new and exciting and she regretted nothing.

How could the Earth King grow up without ever being at least remotely curious about the world beyond his palace walls? She respected Kuei because he was the Earth King but he was incredibly naïve. Hopefully, this trip to the Wall to see the remains of the Fire Nation’s tunneling bore would convince Kuei that the war with the Fire Nation was in fact ongoing. It wasn’t over. It wasn’t even close to being over.

Still, feeling the shock pulsing through the feet of every person present in the train station when Jet called the Earth King, lord of Ba Sing Se, ‘Mr. Rich Peacock’ was the highlight of her day. She would forever treasure that moment. Oma and Shu above, if Jet was that clueless about Kuei’s identity, then Toph had a mighty need to witness Li’s reaction to Kuei’s presence.

Li. Jet had told the truth when he said Li wasn’t hurt, but he hadn’t told the whole truth. If Li had been hurt during the fight with the Spirit… Toph bit her lip. She liked Li. Even if Li was really the Fire Prince himself, he was nice and polite and so incredibly awkward. And Zenko was a blessing to Toph. She wanted to feel them both again alive, safe, and as a friend.

She would.

"I am curious," Kuei wondered aloud. "Do any of you know what a Kuchisake-onna is? I’ve never heard of such a Spirit before."

Neither had Toph. But considering the shock and fear she remembered feeling from the Dai Li and Jet earlier as well as Tengfei the other day, she knew the Spirit was bad news. She rubbed her fist in her other palm and mentally swore to get some answers out of Li when she saw him next.

Ying cradled Hope against her chest as she walked into the Pao Family Tea Shop. She spotted Master Xiu almost instantly despite the dim green light from the green paper lanterns hanging from the ceiling. The light streaming through the half-shuttered windows along the storefront hit the back of the Master Healer’s head as he sat slumped over a cup of steaming tea. She hoped it was chamomile.

When she stepped closer, she recognized the flowery smell and smiled, pleased. Then she noticed the way the healer’s eyes were closed as he leaned heavily on his arm, chin resting in the palm of his hand and bit back a chuckle. The poor man must be exhausted. She wouldn’t wake him from his nap. She was certain he needed it.

Scanning the tea shop once more, she found an empty seat one table down from the slumbering waterbender and sat down. A few seconds later, a portly old man with wise eyes and a friendly smile strode up to her table.

“Good morning, miss,” he greeted, keeping his voice down despite the general rumble from other
customers in the shop. “How can I help you this fine day?”

Ying returned the smile with one of her own. “Good morning. I’ll have whatever he’s having,” she said with a playful nod at a lightly snoring Xiu.

The elderly teamaker followed Ying’s gaze and chuckled. “Wouldn’t we all,” he joked. “Chamomile, it is then.”

She laughed and watch the genial old man move away from her to the kitchen thoughtfully. It was only because she was watching that she noticed the worried look the teamaker shot at the front door, as if looking for someone. Jet had said no one had been able to report back to Pao about Li’s disappearance. Mushi was probably worried sick.

She waited for her tea in silence. After a minute or so, she was forced to undo the frog knots over her chest and pull the shirt flap down so Hope could nurse. She shifted the fabric cradling Hope in a sling so it covered her bare breast while she relaxed against the chair back.

“Here you go,” the teamaker said when he returned. He placed a cup of steaming chamomile tea in front of Ying and rubbed his hands on his apron. “You have a lovely child,” he said, gazing fondly at Hope.

Ying hummed. “Thank you, Mushi.”

The teamaker’s smile brightened. “Oh-ho? I don’t believe you’ve visited before. Do we have a mutual friend perhaps?”

“Of a sort,” Ying said. Her brown eyes lifted to Mushi’s amber. “Li is my nephew.”

The joy faded somewhat from Mushi’s gaze, replaced by worry and hope. “Is that so?” he gasped. “Do you know where he is? I haven’t seen him in two days. I worry about him so.”

“I’m sure,” Ying said, nodding. “Uncles tend to worry about their nephews.”

Amber narrowed suspiciously and Ying sighed. “I’m aware of your identity, Mushi,” she said. “Just as I’m aware of Li’s. You have my word, I will never betray him. He may not be my son by birth, but he is just as much my family as my daughter and my husband.”

The suspicion in the teamaker’s face faded into tired relief. “Thank you,” he said gravely, bowing deeply. “Is Li well?”

Ying sighed and dropped her gaze in worry. “No, he isn’t,” she said. “A waterbender accused him of being a firebender and the Dai Li arrested him. He’s free now,” she added quickly, when it appeared the teamaker would faint from fright. “I’m sure it was just a misunderstanding. So many have come here from outside. I can only imagine the hardship the waterbender went through to get here.”

Old amber sparkled as he caught on. “Ah, yes. I’m sure.”

“It’s a pity, really,” Ying continued, nodding to the seat across from her in invitation. “What Li’s father did to him, and his sister too…” She grimaced and shook her head. “I find it hard to forgive such actions.”

“I believe his father loved him, once,” the old teamaker said seriously, his entire demeanor wilting. “But power can change a person. Absolute power…”
Ying said nothing, letting the concerned silence hang in the air. Eventually, she reached out and took her mug of tea in hand. “Are you familiar with Spirits?” she asked before taking a sip.

The teamaker nodded. “I am, yes. That fox of Li’s is… certainly something.”

Despite the situation, Ying found herself chuckling. “That’s one way of putting it,” she teased. “But I was referring to… malicious Spirits.”

Mushi’s amber gaze darkened as he spoke. “I am. Why do you ask?”

“All of the healthy color drained from the teamaker’s face leaving pale and sickly. “ Spirits have mercy,” he whispered. “I am,” he breathed after a moment to compose himself. “ They are considered to be unique to the Fire Nation. I learned the legend on the road many years ago. As the tale goes, a noblewoman had an affair and her husband discovered her transgression. Angered, her husband slit her face and cursed her.”

Bushy, gray eyebrows drew low over Mushi’s gaze. “Whether the noblewoman died and became a Spirit or remained mortal and her story became legend is debatable,” Mushi continued. “Either way, the stories all agree that the slit-faced woman traveled the countryside hiding her face and asking her victims if they thought she was beautiful. No matter their answer, her victims were doomed to death if they were lucky, insanity if they were not.”

Ying trembled, swallowing thickly. Her precious boy had fought and defeated such a Spirit? A Spirit created by a mother whose children were murdered in her guild’s… Oma and Shu, Ying hated the Spirit for hurting her boy, but she still sent up a prayer for the woman to rest in peace. If her children were murdered in such a way, Ying could easily see herself returning to exact her vengeance if possible.

Li had not killed the Kuchisake-onna. He had helped her achieve her vengeance and reunited her with her deceased children. Ying was so proud of her boy.

“Li and his friends faced a Kuchisake-onna,” Ying said quietly, sipping her tea. “He gave her what she wanted and put her to rest.” She lifted her gaze to the teamaker’s and felt her heart ache at the utter horror on the old man’s face. “He survived and rested last night,” she continued.

Mushi seemed to be incapable of finding words so Ying changed the subject.

“You are aware of Li’s amnesia,” she said, noting the teamaker’s faint nod. “He remembered you were his uncle this morning. He thought you didn’t want him to remember you.” The heartbreaking dismay on the old man’s face was all Ying needed to see. “I believe he is mistaken. He loves you, Mushi. And, however much I adore him and have become his mother of sorts, I think he needs you by his side. Especially now.”

Mushi’s gaze was wide and guileless as they stared at Ying in disbelief and fearful awe.

“He remembered his name,” she said, finishing her tea. “He reacted badly. Master Xiu,” she nodded to the still sleeping waterbender a table over, “was forced to sedate him to prevent him from harming himself during his panic attack. When Master Xiu wakes, I will accompany him to the Autumn Leaf Clinic to join my husband by Li’s side. You are welcome to come with us.” She smiled gently. “I think Li would appreciate that.”

Tears brimmed the teamaker’s hope filled eyes. His smile was fragile but sincere and radiated gratitude. “I would like that,” Mushi said.
Ying hummed and placed two copper coins on the table, but paused when an old, wrinkled hand covered her own. She looked up to see Mushi shaking his head, his tears streaming down his cheeks.

“No,” he said. “Your news of my nephew is more than enough. I find myself in your debt. You have given my nephew everything he never had before. The life you have given him is everything I have prayed for him. And I still don’t know your name, noble lady.”

Her heart warmed and she smiled. “Ying,” she said. “My name is Ying. My husband, Than, is at the clinic right now and this,” she dropped her gaze to her sleepy daughter, “is little Hope. She has Li at her beck and call.”

Mushi’s laughter was pure if watery. “I am not surprised. Your presence has been a blessing, Lady Ying. I will visit Li as soon as I am able. If you ever need anything,” his old hand squeezed hers, “anything,” he repeated, “let me know. I will forever be in your debt.”

Without another word, the old Dragon of the West stood and refilled her mug with hot tea. He continued to do so until Master Xiu woke and Ying was forced to leave with him for the clinic. She did not know General Iroh well, but Ying was willing to get to know him. Anyone who adored Li as much as Iroh clearly did was worth a chance.
For a good few seconds, Tengfei wasn’t sure what to think. What did General How mean by that? The Earth King was in the Earth Palace. He never left. Ever. For any reason. Everyone knew that. He had never even suggested the idea.

More importantly, Long Feng would never had allowed it. How did the Earth King get out of the palace without anyone knowing? How had he not been caught? Kuei was anything but subtle. The Earth King had a brilliant mind, but his intelligence was limited to book smarts. Tengfei shuddered at the thought of Kuei out wandering the streets of Ba Sing Se alone without an armed escort of City Guards and Dai Li.

“You don’t know,” General How murmured.

The grip on Tengfei’s collar eased and he was dropped unceremoniously back down so he stood flat footed on the palace floor. Tengfei narrowed his green eyes and glared at the general who dared lay a hand on him. A shift of a foot, a twist of his wrists, and a flick of his fingers and the good General How found himself sunk up to his shoulders in the stone floor. The general’s cry of shocked offense was music to Tengfei’s ears.

“Perhaps,” Tengfei said, keeping his voice calm and mild from years of practice, “you could explain your actions, general. Attacking a Dai Li in the Earth Palace without provocation.” He clicked his tongue. “I doubt that will go over well with Long Feng.”

The general wriggled in his rock tomb, likely attempting to bend his way out of the situation. To emphasize who was in control, and just because he could and was feeling a bit vindictive about his lack of height, Tengfei sank General How up to his neck. Ignoring the man’s indignant demands to be released, Tengfei lifted his gaze to the terrified servant boy.

“Boy,” Tengfei said, “you aren’t in trouble.”

The servant boy was not soothed despite the truthfulness of Tengfei’s words. He had been in the process of inching his way out of the room when he found himself directly addressed by a Dai Li.

“You said the Earth King was missing,” Tengfei continued. The boy nodded. “Do you know for how long?”
The boy licked his lips, glancing fearfully at the buried general before returning his gaze to Tengfei and replying. “U-uh, about an hour or so?” the servant said, gulping. “I don’t really know for sure, sir. I wasn’t- I-”

Tengfei waited patiently for the boy to finish speaking, tucking his hands in his sleeves to hide his nervously twitching fingers. “Was Long Feng with him?” he asked at last.

The boy shook his head vigorously. “No sir!” he said quickly. “Long Feng’s been missing since the Avatar came last night.”

What? “The-” What?!

The Avatar? Here?! In the Earth Palace? Near the Earth King? Damn it! Why hadn’t the agents on duty stopped him?

The front plaza… Oh. Oh, it made so much sense.

“I assume the Avatar is the one to thank for the… state of the entrance,” Tengfei said, dropping his gaze significantly to the mostly buried General How.

Dark, forest green eyes met Tengfei’s stern passive emerald from under bushy, black eyebrows. “You really didn’t know,” the general murmured.

Tengfei lifted a single eyebrow. “I’ll take that as a yes. Boy,” he said, keeping his gaze on the indignant general, “is the Avatar and his party still here?”

“Uh, n-no,” the servant said. “They flew out this morning just after dawn. That flying… um, furry thing is hard to miss.”

Too true. “Thank you. You’re dismissed.”

Tengfei waited patiently for the sound of the servant boy’s fleeing footsteps to fade before speaking to the general. “I don’t take kindly to being assaulted, especially when I have done nothing recently to deserve it. However,” he took one step closer to the half-buried man and crouched, “I’m willing to overlook that blunder. In exchange, I need you to help me track down the Earth King, Long Feng, and the Avatar.”

The general regarded Tengfei silently before nodding reluctantly. “It would appear we have similar priorities,” he agreed. “For once.”

Indeed. Standing once more, Tengfei twisted his hands still hidden in his sleeves and bent the general free of the floor and back onto his feet. He waited patiently while General How brushed himself off.

“To be clear,” General How said when he was finished, “I don’t like you.”

“Likewise,” Tengfei repeated in a flat tone.

“Nor do I trust you.”

“Again, likewise.”

The general frowned. “You really didn’t know the Earth King was missing.”

Reluctantly, Tengfei heaved a sigh. “I did not,” he admitted. “I was busy all night.”
A thick eyebrow lifted as the general regarded him. “Arresting civilians?” he challenged.

Challenge accepted. Tengfei tilted his head in acknowledgement. “Incidentally, yes,” he began. “The civilian in question brutally assaulted the woman he’d been secretly courting after breaking up with her, directly leading to her suicide and return as a Woman in White.”

He kept his voice calm and matter-of-fact as he spoke, watching the progression of emotions cross the general’s face. “Then, when that didn’t sate his cruelty,” Tengfei continued, “that civilian took his two illegitimate children down to the Lower Ring, sealed them into a potter’s kiln, and allowed them burn to death and their bodies to cremate.”

General How’s face went white in horror, but Tengfei continued.

“The deaths of her innocent children caused the Woman in White’s Spirit to change into a Kuchisake-onna, a malevolent Spirit which proceeded to terrorize and murder the inhabitants of Ba Sing Se in search of revenge.”

Tengfei hesitated briefly, wondering if the revered General How was going to faint or not. The distinct lack of color in the mountainous man’s face was bordering on concerning. Ah well.

“An ally,” Tengfei said, “made a deal with the malevolent Spirit to arrest the civilian responsible for her creation and in exchange, she would stop her string of murders. Unfortunately, the terms of the deal were… less than acceptable.” Try downright stupid. Tengfei would have words with Li. “I and my comrades met the Spirit’s terms but my apprentice was gravely wounded. He barely survived the night even with a dedicated healer seeing to his injuries. I haven’t left his side until now to report to the Grand Secretariat. So, no,” Tengfei added, unable to resist injecting a dose of his best sarcasm into his voice, “I’m afraid I had more important things to deal with last night.”

“I… see,” General How said hesitantly.

For a moment, they both stood still and silent, weighing the other. Then General How’s shoulders relaxed and Tengfei allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief. It would seem that, for the moment, they could set aside their animosity. Absently, Tengfei wondered how long this would last.

“The Avatar and his companions told the Earth King about the war with the Fire Nation last night,” the general said. “He also accused the Grand Secretariat of capturing the Avatar’s bison and holding it prisoner.”

Tengfei grimaced. He figured that would happen eventually. He’d just hoped Long Feng would be able to handle it subtly. Apparently not.

“However,” General How continued, “the Earth King refused to believe the Avatar’s words until he had solid proof.”

Well, that was something, the Dai Li supposed.

“If the Avatar and his party left this morning,” Tengfei began, “and the Earth King is gone as well, and we both know the Grand Secretariat will do anything to stop knowledge of the War with the Fire Nation from reaching his ears...”

It meant the infernal group could only be one place.

“The Outer Wall.”

The damned general looked immensely pleased with his declaration. Yu Huang have mercy. Kuei
was young and naïve but he wasn’t stupid. When faced with obvious evidence of war, he would believe the Avatar. What then?

Shanyuan.

Damn it.

“Is something wrong?”

Both General How and Tengfei tensed. The Dai Li cursed his slip in attention. He was too tired for this. How had he missed the newcomer’s approach?

The young woman wore a long-sleeved forest green dress that allowed for freedom of motion as well as protection. A dark, olive green and black folded leather breastplate covered her torso from her chest to her waist. Four flaps of the same green and black folded leather hung down the front, back, and sides of her dress, offering some protection to her thighs. Her headdress served as both head protection and as a clear designation of the leader.

All that alone would have simply labeled the woman a warrior. It was the distinctive white, red, and black face paint covering her entire face that declared her true identity. No Dai Li could ever fail to recognize the design of that face paint. It was identical to Avatar Kyoshi, the creator of both the Dai Li and the renowned Kyoshi Warriors.

Tengfei tilted his head in respectful acknowledgement at the same time General How bowed at the waist. The young woman clasped her hands, held her back perfectly straight, and bowed politely, equal to equal. Her black bangs brushed her painted cheeks as she straightened.

“I mean no disrespect,” she said. “My name is Suki. I and my comrades just arrived from Kyoshi Island. We have come to offer our aid and support to the Earth King.”

More Kyoshi Warriors? Here?! Who let them in?

“We were told to come here and wait for an escort to our rooms,” the Kyoshi Warrior said, her voice colored with confusion. “When no one came to greet us after a half candlemark, I began to wonder if we were in the right place. Or,” her light amber eyes glanced between Tengfei and General How, “if something happened. Could we offer our assistance?”

Amber. Dear Yu Huang above, her eyes were amber. They were just a shade or so darker than Li’s pale golden gaze. The island of Kyoshi was not officially a part of the Earth Kingdom, choosing to remain its own, unique territory. The Kyoshi Islanders followed the Earth Kingdom laws but they had their own culture and were adamant about their neutrality in the war. Any outsiders who stepped foot on their island were swiftly dealt with, one way or another.

Tengfei highly doubted the Kyoshi Warriors would suddenly drop their neutrality and declare a side in the war. However, if he guessed right, this Kyoshi Warrior was not the best representative of her people. Light amber eyes.

Fire Nation eyes.

“Something has happened,” General How said before Tengfei could break his silence. “We are dealing with the issue. However, I apologize for the delay. I’ll send a servant to escort you and your comrades to the guest quarters. How many of you are there?”

“Just myself and two others,” the Kyoshi Warrior said, nodding in respectful gratitude. “The rest have taken up temporary stations with the immigration offices beyond the Wall. Once we receive
formal orders from the Earth King, we will be available for whatever he sees fit.”

Of course they would. Tengfei hummed noncommittally. He could be jumping to conclusions but after the past few days, he wasn’t going to accept something like this at face value.

Shanyuan.

Tengfei grimaced and returned his attention to the general. “I’ll leave her to you,” he said. “We both know where the Earth King likely is. I can move faster between the Rings than you can.” However much he hated that little fact at the moment. “I’ll go look for-”

“With all due respect,” General How said, cutting the Dai Li off sharply, “you have your apprentice to worry about at the moment.” The soldier’s expression gentled ever so slightly. “Go take care of him. I’ll alert the Guard and take care of things from here.”

Not that Tengfei trusted the general to run things without oversight -which wasn’t entirely fair- he was grateful for the chance to return to Shanyuan’s side with all speed. So, for now, Tengfei would accept things the way they were and trust General How.

“Thank you,” he said, bowing respectfully.

Straightening, he tilted his head down so his hat shaded his eyes and glanced at the Kyoshi Warrior once more. Light amber eyes. He could be wrong, but he highly doubted it. He fingered his iron chains before clasping his hands and planting his feet. The stone floor devoured him, dropping him to the level below. He landed firmly, burying his chi into the stone and planting his feet so he stood with his left foot forward and his right behind. A push of his chi and he skated across the stone floor.

Shanyuan.

This was worse than she thought. Katara swept her water out and gloved her hands, sinking her chi into the cool liquid. Pressing her hands to the young man’s stomach she grimaced.

“This is bad,” she muttered to herself.

The young Dai Li’s insides were scrambled badly. He’d been divested of his uniform leaving his blotched and bruised skin bare to her healing touch. It was awful to look at. Katara could only imagine how awful it must be to feel it. She bit her lip in worry. There was so much internal damage, she wasn’t sure she would be able to heal it all.

Unless…

No. She needed to save that for when she absolutely had no other choice.

But, on the other hand, she had never seen a wound as bad as this. Sweeping her healing water to her right hand, she reached up with her free hand and clasped the small phial dangling from her throat. The Spirit Water from the North Pole’s Spirit Oasis had incredible healing abilities, but she didn’t have much and Katara highly doubted she would have the chance to return to the North Pole to get more.

She glanced up at Jet and felt her hatred for him roiling just beneath the surface. But it was surprisingly muted compared to the worry she felt for the young man she was trying so hard to
heal. Besides, Katara glanced at the young girl sitting next to her, Jin obviously cared for the young Dai Li. Katara barely knew Jin, but she would bet Jin had a crush on the Dai Li.

What was his name again?

“Shanyuan!”

Surprised, Katara sat up and stared at the new arrival. Her gaze narrowed slightly when she recognized the older Dai Li from the healing clinic where she’d first met Jet yesterday. But whereas before the Dai Li had been stern and seemingly immovable, now he was obviously distressed and concerned.

“Tengfei,” Jet called, drawing the elder Dai Li’s attention.

The man hurried to Shanyuan’s side and pressed a hand to the young man’s face. Katara watched as the young man’s eyes fluttered and he tilted his face into the elder Dai Li’s hand. Like a son and a father.

Dad.

Katara felt her heart clench with longing. She missed her father. She missed her home in the South Pole. It was just too hot up here. She dreamed of cold, ice, snow, and her parents. Her mother may be gone but her father was still alive and fighting.

The war was wrong. It had stolen too many innocent lives. She hated the Dai Li and hated Long Feng more. But this young Dai Li, Shanyuan, had gotten hurt trying to stop a Spirit from killing people. Like Aang stopped Hei Bai from hurting those villagers.

“The Kuchisake-onna’s been dealt with,” Jet said, startling Katara from her musings.

Tengfei jolted, whirling to stare at Jet with wide, disbelieving eyes. “That’s impossible,” he snapped. “We had an entire contingent of Dai Li and Long Feng fighting her.”

Long Feng fought Spirits too?!

“They couldn’t stop her,” Tengfei continued, his expression quickly hardening. “What did you do?” he demanded. His green gaze flashed around the room, widened, then locked back on Jet and narrowed dangerously. “Where is Li?”

Zuko. His name is Zuko! Why did no one call him by his real name?

Jet sighed. “He’s at Roulan’s clinic.” Tengfei’s gaze darkened to a glare and Jet reluctantly looked away. “He took the Kuchisake-onna to the potter’s complex and let her see her children. Then she just… faded away.”

Katara returned both hands to Shanyuan’s stomach to reinforce her healing while she listened closely.

“Faded away,” Tengfei repeated doubtfully. “And you’re sure she’s gone?”

“Li is,” Jet said, nodding. “I trust his instincts. Besides,” he added with a side glare at the elder Dai Li, “you and I both know Zenko would tell us if the bitch was still here.”

Katara kept her eyes on her work, but she caught the way Tengfei leaned back from Jet’s kneeling form. She didn’t have to look to hear the disbelief in the way the man sighed.
“Did she say anything before she left?” she heard Tengfei ask warily.

“Yeah,” Jet said. “But it was too quiet for me to hear.” He groaned. “The bitch whispered it in Li’s ear. Whatever it was, it bothered Li.”

The Dai Li hummed. “Did she say anything else?” he asked. “Before she whispered to Li?”

Katara noticed Jet’s hand curl into a fist on the floor by Shanyuan’s side. “Li asked her why she chose him to latch onto him,” Jet said, sounding like he was holding his temper in check. “She said the Dai Li were ‘sages of the Earth Kingdom’ or something like that,” he said, letting his voice adopt a mocking tone.

“But?” Tengfei pressed.

Katara watched Jet’s fist clench.

“But,” Jet grumbled reluctantly, “that you, the Dai Li, aren’t the Avatar or ‘of the Avatar’s lineage,’ I think.”

The Avatar? What did Aang have to do with this? Katara frowned. And what was that about the Avatar’s lineage? Aang was too young to have kids. She blushed but hid it beneath her bowed head and deepening frown of concentration.

Still, it was awfully quiet right now.

She chanced a glance up at Jet and the older Dai Li agent. Jet was biting his thumb like he would a piece of straw and staring at Shanyuan’s face with naked worry. That caught Katara off guard. Jet looked genuinely concerned for the younger Dai Li. Jet’s brown eyes flickered to Jin who still knelt by Shanyuan’s head and Katara followed his gaze.

Jin looked close to tears. Trails of dried up tears lined her cheeks and her eyes were pink from previous cries. The Earth Kingdom girl lifted her soft brown eyes to Jet and did her best to offer him a smile, but it was shaky and quivered with unreleased sobs. It cut Katara to the core. Jin cared about Shanyuan so much.

Jet cared about Shanyuan.

Tengfei cared about Shanyuan.

Katara was the only one who didn’t care as much as they did. She wanted to, but she didn’t know Shanyuan and the young man was Dai Li. She bit her lip and dropped her gaze back to the badly bruised stomach and continued pushing her chi into the healing water.

Footsteps drew the gazes of the others up to the person in the doorway.

“How is he?”

Wait a second. Katara knew that voice. She looked up and, sure enough, there stood one of the three girls who’d made fun of her and Toph on the bridge in the Upper Ring.

“You!” she hissed.

The highborn girl stiffened and stared at Katara with an expression that quickly morphed to haughty disdain. The corner of her mouth lifted in disgust. “Oh. It’s you,” she drawled.

Katara wanted to shout her fury at the spoiled noble, but that would mean she wouldn’t be able to
focus on healing. One look at the elder Dai Li and Katara knew halting her healing would not be a welcome act. Then Journeyman Healer Roulan’s sharp lecture about keeping violence out of healing rang loud and clear in Katara’s mind, stilling her water-gloved hands and sealing her mouth shut. Katara had dumped the spoiled rich girl into the canal yesterday. That was punishment enough.

Shanyuan needed her focus right now.

“I’m not even going to ask,” Jet mumbled. “Hey Noble?”

“You really are an obstinate brat,” the noble girl said, surprisingly without any heat behind her words.

“I didn’t get the chance to tell you earlier,” Jet said, shifting in his seat to face the rich girl.

“Because you left, you mean,” rich girl said.

Jet ignored the jab. He finished turning, crossed his legs, placed on hand on each knee, and bowed as deeply as he could. “Thank you for helping him until a waterbender could get here.”

Katara’s brow furrowed in confusion as she watched the exchange between the two. The rich girl had been trying to help save the young Dai Li too? Why?

Rich girl’s haughty expression faded to something lost and sad. “I’m sorry it wasn’t enough,” she said quietly, moving across the floor to kneel between Jin and the older Dai Li. “I owe him. If you hadn’t warned me…” She took a deep breath and Katara stared as the rich girl’s lower lips actually quivered. “If he hadn’t been there with all of you…” She shut her mouth and took a deep breath. “I would still be engaged to that monster.”

What? What was Katara missing?

Jin leaned against rich girl, resting her head on the highborn’s shoulder. Rich girl reached up with her left hand and ran her fingers through Jin’s brown hair, resting her own head against Jin’s. Her eyes were dark with worry.

“Is there anything you can do?” rich girl asked, lifting her gaze to Katara.

Startled at being directly addressed, Katara hesitated. Her brow furrowed in confusion, concern, and frustration. She wanted to help, she truly did, but the young Dai Li’s injuries were incredibly serious. Katara secretly wondered if even Yugoda in the North Pole would be able to heal these injuries.

Again, her thoughts drifted to the small phial of Spirit Water dangling from her neck. It was all she had and she’d quietly promised to save it for Aang if something ever happened to him. She couldn’t get more Spirit Water. This was all she had. She had to ration it.

Her patient groaned and everyone stared as Shanyuan’s earth brown eyes fluttered open. Katara didn’t stop working on his stomach but she kept an eye on the goings on around her.

“…Master…” Shanyuan whispered.

“Don’t push yourself,” Katara said gently.

She glanced up and saw a sorrowful smile on the elder Dai Li’s face as he gazed down at his apprentice.
“Shanyuan,” Tengfei said, running his fingers through Shanyuan’s dark hair. “How are you feeling?”

“Don’t make him talk too much,” Katara warned.

She could feel every painful drag of air Shanyuan took and the way the movement disturbed the already awful injured beneath her hands.

“Like shit,” the young Dai Li breathed, letting his eyes slip closed briefly.

Tengfei huffed a weak laugh. “You did well,” he said.

Katara saw the faintest hint of a smile tug at the young Dai Li’s lips.

“Thanks,” he said weakly. Brown eyes opened once more and looked around slowly. “Where’s Li?”

Katara felt irritation fill her mind. Again with the ‘Li.’ His name wasn’t Li. It was Zuko. Why were they-

“He got rid of the Kuchisake-onna,” Jet said, pulling Shanyuan’s gaze to him. Katara heard the smile in the former Freedom Fighter’s voice. “Couldn’t have done it without you.”

The young Dai Li’s stomach spasmed at the same time Shanyuan coughed and Katara’s worry returned full force. She didn’t want to fail him.

“…mom says… hi...” Shanyuan whispered, his eyes drifting shut once more for a few seconds.

“Good,” Tengfei said. “Tell her you aren’t coming to join her yet.”

What? Katara looked up at the elder Dai Li through her hair loopies. There was fear in Tengfei’s eyes despite the warmth in the man’s face.

“…yeah… I’ll try…” Shanyuan smiled. “May not have… a choice though.” He huffed a laugh and Katara bit her lip in frustration when the movement jostled the injuries.

“You do have a choice,” Tengfei said fiercely. “You won’t be seeing your mother until you’re old and decrepit. I won’t let you, boy. Death can wait.”

Something in Katara’s heart melted. Tears welled in her eyes without her consent. Her patient, the young Dai Li, Shanyuan had lost his mom. She knew that pain. Mom.

Mom.

Katara sniffed, hiding it as best she could behind a deep breath. She snuck another look at Tengfei and no longer saw a Dai Li. The man’s entire demeanor screamed ‘father.’ Shanyuan was just like her. They’d both lost their mother and only had a father figure left.

Shanyuan swallowed thickly. “Li’s a…” he gasped, “pretty bird.”

Whatever that meant.

“Shanyuan?”

Jin.
Shanyuan opened his eyes and smiled. “Hey Jin,” he whispered.

“Hey,” Jin replied, giving the young man a watery smile while running her fingers through his hair. “You had better heal up. I need to take you out for noodles.”

Oh. Oh no.

Shanyuan’s brow furrowed in tired confusion. “Wha-what?” he breathed.

Jin made a sound that was probably meant to be a laugh but was more sob than anything else. “A date, you silly goose-pig,” she teased. “I’m going to take you out on a date.” She sniffed and managed to recover some of her self-control. “So you’d better heal up, you hear me?”

A faint flush of color bloomed in Shanyuan’s pale cheeks, then he smiled back. “I’ll try,” he promised.

Katara’s heart broke. She couldn’t do this.

She looked up at Tengfei and saw the dawning realization in the Dai Li’s emerald eyes. The man looking thoroughly defeated, like he’d been crushed beneath one of Toph’s boulders. There were tears glittering in his eyes that he refused to let fall.

She knew that expression. It was the same one she’d seen on her own father’s face when they had laid her mother to rest in the watery embrace of La beneath Tui’s silvery rays. It was the expression of a man who knew he was losing his world and knew there was nothing he could do to stop it.

No. No, she would not let that happen.

She promised to save it for a serious situation. This didn’t involve Aang, but… She knew Aang would understand. Heck, she bet if Aang knew he’d demand she use it now. With that thought ringing in her head, she drew on the determination and renewed strength welling from deep within her.

She swept her water back into her canteen and sat up. She ignored the collection of gazes staring at her in favor of reaching up and uncorking the phial hanging from her neck. With one hand she swept a strand of Spirit Water out before replacing the cork with her other hand. Then she used her free hand to stream the water out of her canteen once more.

*Tui and La, please make this work.*

Merging the strand of Spirit Water with her own water, Katara sank her chi into the cool liquid and pressed her Spirit blessed water-gloved hands against Shanyuan’s stomach. This battle she would not lose. She would not watch another father lose his son.

She would not.
Both

Chapter Summary

In which Iroh finally meets another uncle and reunites with his nephew and Azula has made some interesting observations.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Not as long as usual, but I figured the feels in this would be enough to pass. I'll edit this seriously tomorrow morning. Until then, night~

Iroh desperately wanted to leave the tea shop to see his nephew but he knew Pao was struggling to get his business back up and running after the very early shutdown the other day. For that reason, he remained at the tea shop for another couple hours before deeming it polite to ask permission to leave. Surprisingly, when he explained the situation, Pao insisted Iroh leave immediately and check on his nephew.

“Are you sure?” Iroh asked. “It will be busy soon.”

“I can handle it,” Pao said, waving the old tea maker off. “We have water to spare and you went out of your way to put all the kettles on the fire. Besides,” his tone gentled, “you may not have been born in Ba Sing Se but you have an idea of how the Dai Li operate. If your nephew was captured then released…” Pao clicked his tongue and shook his head in remorse. “You may not recognize him.” He rested a hand on Iroh’s shoulder. “Best you see for yourself at a healing clinic than in the street.”

Iroh smiled gratefully and bowed deeply. “Thank you for your consideration,” he said.

Pao humphed and crossed his arms. “I expect your Li to be at work as soon as he can,” he said in mock seriousness. “And Mushi,” he added, half turning back to the tea shop’s kitchen, “next time a member of your family starts working here, tell me.”

With a bright smile and jovial laughter, Iroh straightened. “I will,” he said. “I expect my nephew will need all the support he can get as he recovers his memories and…” his demeanor drooped once more, “recovers from the Spirit attack.”

The tea shop owner’s face paled and his eyes flickered between the shop’s two front windows in concern. “ Spirits,” he muttered, shuddering. “Crazy things. With all the nonsense I’ve witnessed since you came to work for me, Mushi, I’d almost wager I’m living in a Spirit Tale.”

Iroh wisely muffled his chuckles. “Yes, I suppose so.”

Best not to mention the Avatar was in the city. Pao needed to be in the right state of mind to run the shop after all. With another polite bow, Iroh hung up his apron, unhooked his straw hat, and stepped out the back door into the alleyway.
The walk to the Autumn Leaf Clinic was brisk and gave Iroh enough time to both build his hope and bolster his anxiety. Zuko, his precious nephew, remembered him. The hope Ying’s revelation planted in his old heart was near painful in its strength. But Ying also warned Iroh that Zuko’s realization of his true identity was not something he reacted well too.

That thought terrified Iroh. His nephew had grown so much since they parted ways in the Earth Kingdom wilderness. Zuko smiled and laughed and had a lover and a family that truly cared for him. Everything he lost so long ago.

When had Zuko lost it? When Zuko was a small child, Iroh left the fight leaving a rambunctious child behind. When he returned, Zuko was nothing like the person he’d been. It had only gotten worse as the years passed.

So much anger and hate and hurt and fear. Zuko had such a capacity to feel and a heart that wanted to feel that Iroh sometimes feared for his nephew’s sanity. After Ozai burned and banished Zuko, Iroh had done his best to be the father his nephew needed.

The Zuko Iroh had come to know here in Ba Sing Se was the nephew he lost so long ago. He would love Zuko no matter what he did or who he became, but he sincerely wanted Zuko to be at peace with himself.

Trudging up to the door of the Autumn Leaf Clinic, he drew a deep, calming breath and walked inside. Patients were scattered about the clinic, some old and some young. So many. Ah, the contamination from the other day. Iroh had a sneaking suspicion that contamination was Spirit-influenced.

“What is i- Oh, it’s you.”

Looking up, Iroh offered a weary smile to the stern healer. “Ah, Roulan,” he greeted, bowing and pushing his hat back so it hung against his back. “I’ve come to visit young Li.”

Roulan hummed and waved to the back door. “We laid him out on the patio in the back,” she said briskly. “He seems to react well to sunlight. Not surprising really.” She glanced knowingly at Iroh before scoffing. “Keep it down and don’t scare the poor boy.”

“I don’t plan to,” Iroh said.

“I know you don’t,” Roulan said. “But Li’s very skittish right now. Master Xiu eased him out of sedation but based on the state of Li’s mind, I feel I should warn you. Don’t stress him out too much.”

Oh dear.

Iroh nodded seriously. “I will take your words to heart,” he said.

The healer hummed then returned her attention to her patient, waving Iroh back as she did so. Obeying the silent permission, Iroh made his way carefully through the clinic to the open back door. The yard behind the clinic was filled with an impressive herb garden and a tile patio where several freshly cleaned patient mats were strung up to dry on a clothes line. A young girl, likely an apprentice healer, knelt by a bucket of sudsy water washing another mat on the left side of the patio. On the right…

Resting peacefully on a mat with a thin pillow beneath his head was Zuko. A young man with brown hair tied back in a bun and a neatly trimmed beard sat by Zuko’s side. The back of the man’s hand was pressed against Zuko’s forehead. Across from the man lay the Knowledge Seeker.
The fox Spirit’s small body was curled close to Zuko’s scarred cheek and her snout rested comfortably on Zuko’s throat. It was both protective and endearing.

One of the Knowledge Seeker’s ears twitched in Iroh’s direction and he knew he’d been noticed. After a moment, the man lifted his Earth brown eyes and noted Iroh’s presence. Straightening, the man nodded in greeting.

“You must be Mushi,” he said.

Iroh nodded and hesitantly made his way to his sleeping nephew. “I am,” he said. “May I?”

“Please,” the man said, gesturing to the empty place on Zuko’s other side.

“Thank you.” Iroh knelt and removed his hat, placing it on the tile next to him. “Excuse me, fair lady,” he said to the kitsune.

The fox Spirit made a soft warbling sound and flicked two of her tails in greeting before falling silent and still once more. Iroh gazed at the small Spirit thoughtfully. He had seen many things in his long life. But he never dreamed of finding a Spirit so closely bonded to a human before. Zuko had so much at his fingertips and Iroh would bet his treasured White Lotus tile that his nephew took none of it for granted.

“You must be Than,” he said once he was settled in his seat. “I met your wife and daughter in the tea shop.”

Than smiled. “She’s a dream, isn’t she?” he said brightly. “I sing praises to Oma and Shu every time I see her beautiful face.”

Ah, young love. It had been so long since Iroh experienced that feeling. He missed his long dead wife and son dearly, but he would never regret the gifts he’d received in her absence.

“I expressed my gratitude to your wife for everything you’ve done for my nephew,” Iroh began, resting his hands on his lap, “but I would like to thank you as well.” He bowed deeply. “My nephew has never known the love and safety you have given him. I will forever be in your debt.”

“Think nothing of it,” Than said, waving Iroh’s words aside. “Li- er…”

“Li is fine,” Iroh said gently.

Than smiled wanly. “Li has been a blessing to us ever since we found him.” He ran his fingers through Zuko’s black hair before petting the Knowledge Seeker’s gray-black fur. “He is kind and thoughtful and…” Than paused and shook his head. “I would be proud to call him my son,” he said finally.

Iroh felt warmth bloom in his heart. “You would not be the only one,” he said sadly.

He felt Than’s brown eyes settle on him for a moment before drifting back to Zuko’s sleeping face.

“I hope I am not asking for the world,” Than said quietly. “But Li has become such an integral part of my family that I…” He sighed, his shoulders drooped. “I can hardly imagine life without him now.”

Yes, that was a feeling Iroh knew well. “You are asking for the world,” he said, watching the way Than’s form drooped further. “But it is a world I would be more than happy to share,” he added with an open smile. “It is not unusual for a child to have more than one uncle, after all,” he said,
chuckling as he tapped the side of his nose.

Instantly, it was as if a weight had been lifted from Than’s shoulders. He sat up straighter and his expression relaxed in a relieved smile. But before he could speak, Zuko shifted on the mat between them immediately drawing their attention.

Slowly, Zuko’s eyes fluttered open revealing the pure, pale gold Iroh always attributed to his mother, Fire Lady Ursa. Zuko’s gaze was clouded with sleepy confusion which gradually cleared to wakeful awareness. The Knowledge Seeker’s ears perked up and she sat up, nuzzling Zuko’s scarred ear with her snout and making soft, soothing sounds. Zuko’s gaze shuttered tiredly as he reached up to scratch the fox Spirit behind her ears, murmuring something Iroh couldn’t quite make out.

Then pale gold opened once more and Zuko looked at Than first. He swallowed thickly and he seemed to wilt under the man’s regard. “Than,” he whispered.

“Li,” Than said fondly.

Instantly, Zuko shrank back and looked away, thus noticing Iroh’s presence. Instantly, the boy tensed and his eyes widened in fright. It hurt to see his nephew so afraid. Iroh felt tears prick his eyes as he struggled to find the words that would soothe his nephew’s mounting fear.

“I missed you,” he said finally.

It wasn’t much but it seemed to be enough. The fear in Zuko’s eyes melted into surprise. “But… But I thought…” Zuko hesitated. “I thought you didn’t want me to… remember you.”

“Oh Zuko,” Iroh said, leaning over and pressing a hand on his nephew’s head. “I have always wanted you to remember me. But I have wanted you to be free of your pain for much, much longer. If forgetting me was the price to pay for that wish,” Iroh smiled tenderly, “then it was well worth it. I was never far, after all.”

Tears pooled in Zuko’s good eye. “Uncle,” he whispered, the word broken and pleading. He struggled to push himself up from the mat so he could reach up and wrap his arms around Iroh’s neck and cling, weeping softly by the old dragon’s ear. “I’m sorry,” he whispered brokenly. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to forget. I didn’t mean to… I’m so sorry.”

Unable to contain the joy welling from within his heart, Iroh encompassed his prodigal nephew in his arms and held the boy close. He murmured soothing words of encouragement when it seemed Zuko would lose himself in sadness. He lifted his gaze to Than who still sat patiently on the tile. The man’s face was sad but calm and accepting. It hurt to see the man so sad. Iroh did not know Than well, but the potter had loved his nephew better than any parental figure Zuko had ever known. That in and of itself was worthy of gratitude.

Zuko shifted, pushing himself away from Iroh embrace to hesitantly look over his shoulder at Than. The man offered Zuko a fond smile which quickly morphed into surprise when Zuko reached out to him as well. Reluctantly, Iroh let his nephew go and watched as the boy embraced Than. Than’s brown eyes were wide with wonder as he returned the embrace.

“I’m sorry,” Zuko said just loud enough for Iroh to hear. “Please. Please don’t hate me. I didn’t know. I swear I didn’t know.”

The wonder in Than’s eyes faded to dismay as he gripped Zuko’s shoulders and pushed the boy back so he could see the boy’s face. “Never be sorry for who you are,” the man said firmly. “Ever.
Ying and I have watched you since we found you. We’ve seen your heart.” He chuckled. “Do you really think Hope would be so attached to someone evil?”

Iroh felt his heart swell as he watched blotches of red warm his nephew’s cheeks.

“Hey,” Than said, giving Zuko a gentle shake to draw his gaze back. “I don’t care if you prefer Li or Zuko. You will always, always be the boy I have declared to be my nephew and who I and Ying would be proud to call son.”

The raw hope Iroh could see in his nephew’s expression made him feel small. Not for the first time, Iroh sent up a silent prayer to Agni. Zuko had lost so much and grown through the pain and loss to become a blessing this world desperately needed. Zuko was not the Avatar, but Zuko was Iroh’s nephew, the source of an old dragon’s hope, a young Earth Kingdom family’s son-by-heart, and another young Earth Kingdom boy’s lover. Zuko had made a life for himself here in Ba Sing Se. It may not be allowed to last forever but Iroh would fight his hardest to make it last as long as he could.

“But… I’m…” Zuko closed his eyes and hung his head in despair. “I’m that… the Fire Lord’s son.” His left hand lifted to brush his fingers along the edge of his scar and Iroh frowned.

“That may be true,” he said just loud enough for Than and Zuko to hear. “But that does not make you the Fire Lord himself.” He smiled. “You remind me of your mother. Lady Ursa loved you, fiercely.” He placed a hand on Zuko’s shoulder. “You inherited her heart. I see it every day. Than is right. You are not your parents, nor are you your lineage, though it may be a part of you. You are who you make yourself to be.”

Zuko tilted his head to stare at Iroh over his shoulder, his good eye wide and watery.

“No matter who you decide to be,” Iroh said, squeezing his nephew’s shoulder, “you will always be my and Than’s nephew.”

Zuko’s eye widened. “Both?” he said softly. “I’m allowed to have both?”

Oh Zuko. “You are,” Iroh said. “Changing names does not change your identity. Besides,” he added with a playful wink, “it is not unusual for someone to have multiple uncles.”

Oh the joy in that smile. Agni above, shine down on that smile.

So, the Earth King was missing, was he? Or at least misplaced. How marvelously unfortunate.

She hummed as she studied the chambers she currently sat in. General How had been true to his word and provided a servant to escort herself and her comrades to a private guest chamber. It was miserably green but there was nothing she could do about that yet.

She settled down on the cushioned bench by the table and picked at the fruit there, toying with them before plopping them into her mouth. Her thoughts drifted back to the confrontation between General How and that other man. Despite the uneasy truce she witnessed, those two men didn’t seem to get along usually. She could work with that.

More importantly, the uniform that other man wore was the same as the one she and Mai saw on that stranger roof-hopping in the Lower Ring. She doubted they were the same person. That meant that distinctive dark green robe and conical hat was a uniform. Unlike the general, the other man
wore no visible weapons nor armor but Azula knew a warrior when she saw one.

Whoever he was, she knew he had noticed something about her that made him question her assumed identity. Yet he’d said nothing to the general. That implied there was rift between the general and whatever order the man in the dark green uniform belonged to. Rifts meant distrust which became a breeding ground for betrayal.

Azula hadn’t missed the way the other servants had been conveniently absent until after the uniformed man left. That spoke volumes of the power, literal or figurative, the man wielded. She wanted that. She would need to keep an ear out and her eyes open for the leader of that man’s order. This little side quest of hers could prove to be so much more interesting than she’d originally thought.
Between Jobs

Chapter Summary

In which Jin and Jet get a new job offer and Tengfei gets some long-overdue answers, which naturally leads to more questions.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm on a roll, for now anyway. Mischief seem to be a-brewing.

“That’s enough.”

No. It wasn’t. She wasn’t through.

“That’s enough.”

A large hand covered both of her water-gloved hands and gently pushed her back.

“You need to rest,” the voice continued. “You’ll exhaust yourself if you don’t. Rule number one of healing, young lady. Never become a patient yourself.”

Oh. Yeah, that made sense. She was a bit tired now that she thought about it. The Spirit energies in the North Pole Spirit Water were almost indistinguishable from her regular water now too. Whatever healing properties she could wring out of it now were so minuscule as to be basically nonexistent.

With a sigh that was deeper than she meant for it to be, she bent her water back into her canteen and corked it shut. Then she let herself relax and catalogue her physical state. Her back ached from leaning over and she had the beginnings of a headache from straining her chi. A yawn broke her thought process and she reluctantly admitted that she probably was a lot more tired than she originally thought.

Running an achy arm through her frazzled hair, she stared down at her patient’s bruised stomach. She’d managed to fix some of the damage but not enough to satisfy her. She would need to make several more visits before she was certain Shanyuan would be well enough to walk and move about on his own without any serious danger.

The large hand that had stopped her from healing rested on her shoulder and squeezed.

“Thank you,” the man said. Tengfei. That was his name. “You’ve done more than enough.”

“No,” she muttered, shaking her head. “Not done yet. Still needs work.”

Her vision blurred and she rubbed her eyes.

“You need to rest first,” Tengfei said, grasping both of her shoulders and easing her back. She felt
one arm loop around her back and the other scoop under her knees before she was suddenly lifted up.

“She is welcome to sleep in the next room,” a girl’s voice that sounded vaguely familiar said. “I’ll have my family’s healer keep an eye on her. That way we can make sure she stays healthy and we don’t have to move Shanyuan.”

“Thank you,” Tengfei said, his voice heavy with… something. Exhaustion? Concern?

Wow. She really was tired. Maybe she should…

Jin watched from her spot by Shanyuan’s head as Tengfei carried the sleeping waterbender out of the room. She was so grateful to Katara for helping heal Shanyuan. The young Dai Li was finally asleep again. The awful purple bruises on his stomach weren’t nearly as dreadful now as they’d been before Katara began working on him, but Jin was still worried. At least Shanyuan was breathing easier now.

She threaded her fingers through her friend’s long hair. She wanted to brush it all out and braid it but she was afraid of accidentally waking Shanyuan up. Oma and Shu knew the poor boy needed all the sleep he could get.

“Will you two be needing beds as well?” Qiao asked, coming back into the room and kneeling by Jin’s side.

Jin shook her head. “I’ve got a place,” she said.

“Me too,” Jet said, speaking for the first time in a long time.

Qiao hummed but glanced at Jin significantly. “Are you certain?” she asked. “Will you be missed for another night? I think it would do your friend some good if there was someone he knew well here when he wakes.”

Jin’s shoulders drooped. “I… I don’t think I should,” she said with a sigh. “I want to but I’ve skipped work so far today and I’m sure I’ll be missed. The ladies are always worrying about us. I don’t want them to think something bad happened.”

Even though it did.

“Where do you work?” Jet asked suddenly. “I can stop by and let them know what’s going on.” Startled, Jin lifted her gaze to her friend. Jet met her gaze and grimaced. “I don’t really have a job anymore,” he added with a shrug, “so it’s not like I’m missing much either way.”

“You don’t have a job?” Qiao asked surprised.

Jet shrugged and gave the noble girl a wry grin. “Hard to keep a job when I literally just helped bring down my boss’s kid,” he said.

Qiao’s highborn features paled considerably and she lifted her arm so her light green sleeve covered her mouth. After a few seconds, she lowered her arm and her expression was calm once more.

“I see,” she murmured. “My… condolences.”
Jet snorted.

“What was your profession?” Qiao asked curiously. “You’re obviously not from the Upper Ring and you’re not nearly well dressed enough to be a Middle Ring citizen. Neither are you, actually,” she added, turning her curious gaze to Jin. “Were you two messengers?”

“I was,” Jet said, raising a hand. “Jin got up here with my and Shanyuan’s help. Tengfei helped too.”

Humming thoughtfully, the noble considered Jet’s words. “Would you mind if I hired you?”

“Ye- wha?” Jet gasped, staring at Qiao like she suddenly sprouted a second head.

“You too, of course,” Qiao added, patting the back of Jin’s hand. “I find I’m suddenly in need of a couple good messengers.” She rolled her shoulders and sighed, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear in one elegant sweep of her hand. “I must begin the courting process all over again and it’s hardly polite for an unattached lady to court a man without a middle man.”

Oh! Well-

“What the hell?” Jet hissed. “You literally just watched your ex get arrested and you’re already looking into alternatives? Oma and Shu, you nobles work fast.” He ducked his head, thrusting his fingers into his messy brown hair.

Jin rolled her eyes. “No, you idiot,” she said, careful to keep her voice down so she didn’t rouse Shanyuan. “She’s a noble. If she doesn’t at least pretend there’s someone else she’s courting, she’ll be engaged again.”

Qiao sniffed, squaring her shoulders and slipping her hands into her sleeves. “Indeed,” she agreed primly. “You men are blessed with the ability to choose who you will bed for the rest of your life. We women don’t get that choice more often than not. Besides,” her red lips twisted in a disgusted sneer, “I haven’t the slightest interest in sex. I find it… distasteful.”

“And there I must disagree,” Jet said.

Jin didn’t even have to look to know her crazy friend’s face was sporting a healthy leer. “Yes, yes, we know. No need to talk about your sex life here,” she said dismissively.

“Ugh, that’s so disgusting,” Jin heard the noble girl mutter under her breath. Clearing her throat, Qiao said louder, “Do you want the job or not?”

“I would,” Jin said, surprising herself. “I’d have to tell the ladies, though. We’re all a big family and I know they’ll worry about me. The fact my new boss will be a woman will make them feel better, but they’re all like doting aunts.” She huffed a laugh. “Would you mind if I brought my shrine?”

“Shrine?” Qiao parroted, tilting her head in confusion.

“For my parents,” Jin clarified. “I never leave them behind.”

The corners of Qiao’s eyes creased in concern. “Of course,” she said quickly. “You can place it in my family’s shrine, if you wish, or keep it in your own room. Whichever if preferable.”

Jin sighed in relief. “Then I’ll accept.”
Qiao’s smile was warm and friendly, until both girls turned to Jet. The boy hesitated, scratching the back of his head in consideration. Eventually, he shrugged.

“I guess,” he said. “But I need to stay in the Lower Ring. I’m living with my two friends. We’re family. They work at the zoo.”

“Oh! The one the Avatar expanded the other day?” Qiao asked, perking up in interest. “I heard about that.”

Jet snorted. “He expanded it alright,” he said dryly. “Right on top of open farm land in the Agrarian Ring.”

Qiao gasped.

“He didn’t know,” Jet said quickly, waving off Qiao’s questions. “He’s only a twelve-year-old. It didn’t even occur to him to think about farm land feeding people. Anyway,” he leaned back, bracing himself with his hands on the floor behind him, “as long as I can keep living with my two friends, you have a way to contact me, and I have a reliable way to get up here whenever you need me, then yeah. I’ll take the job.”

He freed one hand and began nibbling on the thumbnail.

“Good. Then you can start today,” Qiao declared, starteling both Jin and Jet.

The noble girl cast a wary glance over her shoulder at the doorway where Tengfei was just visible in the hallway speaking to someone hidden by the wall. Sure that she was as alone as she would get, Qiao scooted closer and lowered her voice.

“I don’t want to be married off,” she said fiercely. “But my family isn’t in the best situation right now politically. I need to make sure I keep my position and maintain my independence. That’s where you two come in.”


“In a manner of speaking,” Qiao said. “I have the Dai Li in my family’s debt so there’s some leverage I can work with. But that won’t keep me from being forced to bed some noble who can’t keep his pathetically small penis in his pants.”

Jet snorted and Jin bit back a snicker.

“So I’m guessing Jin and I will be carrying your ‘love letters,’” Jet said, making elegant air quotes with his fingers, “to this imaginary suitor of yours and come back with information. That it?”

Qiao hummed in approval. “Mostly,” she said. “Jin will mainly be responsible for passing my letters on to the few contacts I already have. I have a slightly different job for you, brat.”

Jet patted his chest. “You flatter me, Noble.”

The noble girl clicked her tongue but continued speaking nonetheless. “You used to work for Quon, correct?”

Jet hesitated. “Yeah?”

“Good,” Qiao declared. “I want you to use your connections to draw his business to me.”

Jet blinked, his mouth dropping open in surprise. He looked at Jin who stared right back at him in
equal shock. Then Jet started laughing, quickly covering his mouth to smother the sound as best he could.

“Oh-ho, you are evil,” he drawled. “I think we’ll get along just fine.”

Jin shook her head in disbelief. Thought over the idea one more time, then pressed her lips in a grim line. Quon may not be his son Hongqi. He may not have been the one to hurt those children, but Jin still wanted him to pay.

“I know most of the gossip in the Lower Ring,” she said suddenly, turning her gaze to Qiao. “I can pass along any information I think you might find interesting. I’ll have to go down there every now and then to maintain my contacts, though. But then again,” she grinned guilelessly, “I do love Mushi’s tea.”

Jet snickered. “I don’t know about you, but I love Mushi’s tea waiter more.”

He licked his lips and Jin really wished he was within reach so she could smack him upside the head. Thankfully, Qiao’s groan of disgust was just as satisfying. Then Jet’s amusement abruptly vanished and he sat up, looking at something behind them.

“How is she?” he asked.

“As well as can be expected,” Tengfei said grimly, leaning against the doorjamb. “She’s suffering from overexertion. It happens to benders who overextend themselves. A good night’s sleep will help her recover.”

“Good,” Jin said, sighing in relief. “I want to thank her when she wakes up.”

“Miss Yan,” Tengfei said, locking his dark green gaze on the noble girl. “As much as I’d like to assume you’re doing this out of the goodness of your heart, I doubt that’s the case. I’m grateful either way, but I have to ask what you plan to get out of this. The Dai Li may be indebted to you, but that doesn’t mean we’ll treat you and your family any differently than usual.”

Qiao turned so she knelt facing the elder Dai Li and bowed politely. “I don’t expect you too,” she said, straightening, “so you’ll forgive me if I don’t give you the details. However,” she clasped her hands on her lap and narrowed her eyes, “understand that no matter how much I love Ba Sing Se, I refuse to do my… civic duty.”

Jin pursed her lips in quiet amusement when Tengfei lifted a single eyebrow.

“I have suddenly come into the freedom to pursue, shall we say, personal hobbies,” the noble said calmly. “As much as I’d like to assume you’re doing this out of the goodness of your heart, I doubt that’s the case. I’m grateful either way, but I have to ask what you plan to get out of this. The Dai Li may be indebted to you, but that doesn’t mean we’ll treat you and your family any differently than usual.”

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Then he rubbed his forehead and Jin grimaced in sympathy. The man must be emotionally and physically drained. Jin hadn’t slept all night and neither had Tengfei. If he was even the slightest bit as tired as Jin felt, then she hoped he could catch a nap or two before he fell asleep on his feet.

“Jet,” Tengfei said, lifting his head, “a word?”

Jet lifted both eyebrows in interest and got to his feet, following Tengfei out into the hallway. Jin watched him go before Qiao tapped her arm, drawing her attention. Something brushed her skin
and Jin looked down to see an official looking badge being handed to her.

“This is your new messenger identification,” Qiao said. “It will give you easy passage between the Upper and Lower Rings. And since you’ll be acting as go-between for my nonexistent lover,” she smirked wryly as she pointed to a particular sigil next to her family’s wax seal, “this will make it clear to anyone who stops you at night that you’re acting on personal business. You shouldn’t be delayed much after the first couple times. No one wants to get involved in courtship complications.”

Jin took the offered badge and tied it securely to her belt. “Thank you,” she said.

Qiao shook her head. “Thank you,” she said, meeting Jin’s gaze. “You have no idea how much you’re helping me. I meant what I said. I’ll have a room made up for you near mine and you can put your shrine where you wish. Do you require any help moving your things here?”

“No,” Jin replied, shaking her head. “I don’t have much. Besides,” she added with a smile, “the ladies will want to send someone to help me anyway. It’s not like they have much work during the day, after all. They usually just sleep most of the day while the girls and I clean up the place and make sure everything’s ready for the next night.”

Qiao blushed but nodded.

“So what did you want to tell me that you couldn’t say in front of Jin?” Jet asked, crossing his arms and leaning back against the wall.

Tengfei looked down the hall in both directions and frowned. “You and I are both aware of Li’s… disposition,” he said without preamble, returning his attention to Jet.

Instantly on guard, Jet tensed up, feeling the weight of his two hook swords at his belt.

“So I have to ask,” Tengfei continued. “What makes you think he’s the Blue Spirit?”

Oh. That’s it? Relaxing somewhat, Jet shrugged. “Other than the fact he all but admitted it? His uncle told me.”

Immediately, Jet regretted his words. He watched as all the blood fled the Dai Li’s face in horror.

“He’s not here to do anything,” Jet said quickly. “He came as a refugee and to keep an eye on his nephew. Li has…” He bit his lip wishing it was a straw. “Look,” he said with a sigh, “I made a promise not to tell anyone about Li’s problem but I already broke that promise when I got the healers this morning so…”

He was going to regret this. He just knew it.

“Li has amnesia,” he said finally. “He doesn’t remember anything from before a month ago.”

The Dai Li’s eyebrows lifted in blatant skepticism and Jet groaned. “It’s true,” he insisted. “He… does know his name now,” he admitted, “but that’s on me. I couldn’t keep that a secret from him. He deserved to know his own name. And you know why? When he found out, he had a panic attack that was so bad, a waterbender had to knock him out before he hurt himself.”

Tengfei’s frown deepened in incredulity. “You’re serious, aren’t you?” he whispered.
“Deadly,” Jet said grimly. “Jin and Shanyuan both know about his amnesia, although,” he hesitated, “they don’t know his real name. I’m leaving that up to Li to decide.”

“Then why tell me?”

Good point. Jet winced and picked his words with care. “Because,” he paused in thought, “you’re not an asshole, for starters. Second…” He bit his thumb and groaned. “Second, because I trust you.”

Ugh, this was so many kinds of messed up.

“You know Li cares about people, even people he doesn’t know,” Jet said. “He didn’t put up that spell by the canal the other night just for kicks, you know. He put another one up in the restaurant district first. He wanted to be sure the people there were safe from the Spirit bitch. He didn’t ask or expect anything in return. He just did it.”

“He cries over children burning to death,” Jet said, satisfied with the way Tengfei winced subtly, “he’s a slave to his adopted baby cousin’s whims, he blushes at the slightest mention of sex,” Tengfei rolled his eyes, “and he can kick my ass with his swords.”

Green eyes sparkled with interest at the mention of swords and Jet mentally patted himself on the back.

“We spar whenever we can,” Jet said. “He always used his swords. Spirits, he didn’t even know he was a bender until about a week ago.” The Dai Li straightened in shock but Jet forged on. “He made some deal with Wan Shi Tong to do some things. That’s one of the reasons why Zenko’s always hanging around him. If this big shot Spirit can trust Li, I think you should too.”

“Besides,” Jet took a deep breath in preparation for the final point, “he’s wanted dead by the Fire Nation. Did you know that?”

“I’m aware the Blue Spirit is wanted, yes,” Tengfei said, nodding.

“Yeah,” Jet said curtly, cutting off the Dai Li before Tengfei could dismiss the point. “He was wanted as the Blue Spirit until the Fire Nation admiral he rescued the Avatar from found out who he was and tried to assassinate him. Because of that, the Fire Lord himself put out a death warrant on Li’s head.”

Oh yeah, it looked like Tengfei was finally beginning to understand.

“But that’s not the best part,” Jet continued. “You wanna know how he lost his memory? His bitch-ass sister tried to kill him. Blasted him in the chest with a close-range fire blast. We all saw the scar,” he said, nodding back at Jin and Shanyuan still in the healing room. “I’ve seen scars like that on people. Dead people. He thinks the only way he survived was because he knew a block of some kind. Obviously, he couldn’t deflect it entirely. But he managed to survive. That’s all that matters to me.”

Tengfei looked positively floored.

“So you tell me, Dai Li,” Jet said seriously. “Who would you rather trust? Someone who has an Earth Kingdom family and an Earth boyfriend,” he couldn’t resist smirking proudly, “and who the Fire Lord would love to see dead? Or some stupid rule about there being no war in Ba Sing Se?”

That got an odd reaction. Tengfei harumphed and rubbed his forehead in what looked a lot like frustration. “I doubt that rule will hold up for much longer anyway,” he grumbled and that was
“Yeah? How do you mean?” Jet asked.

Tengfei rolled his eyes and huffed. “Let’s just say the Avatar got to the Earth King.”

What’s that got to do with- Oh! Well shit. That changed things. Despite the tense situation, Jet snickered.

“Kid’s got balls, I’ll give him that,” he said. “Course, with a girlfriend like Katara, the beginnings of a brain like Sokka’s, and the sheer force of personality that is Toph,” he snorted, “I’m not really surprised.”

Surprisingly, a wry smile worked its way onto Tengfei’s face. It quickly vanished.

“You said Li’s sister tried to kill him,” Tengfei said.

Jet shifted to a more comfortable position, crossing his ankles and pressing his upper back harder against the wall. “Yeah. You can ask the Avatar. He was there too.” He shuddered. "Kid said she can bend blue fire."

"I'm guessing she was hunting the Avatar, then," Tengfei said after a moment to process the whole 'blue fire' thing. Not that Jet blamed the guy.

"Yeah. Aang said she was tracking him using that giant flying furball's shedding fur, of all things. I figure Li tracked him the same way. Anyway, they ended up fighting and the bitch princess tried to kill him. Aang got away." Jet paused, studying Tengfei's reactions closely. "Why?"

Oh, he did not like the look in the Dai Li’s eyes.

“Do you think Li would recognize the princess by sight?”

Oh. Shit.
Toph was thrilled. Sokka’s idea worked. Taking the Earth King to the Outer Wall and showing him the Fire Nation’s drill with the Fire Nation’s insignia on it was the right decision. Even though Long Feng showed up with two more Dai Li in tow and tried to explain the drill’s presence away, Kuei had realized the truth.

Toph would treasure the moment she felt Long Feng’s shock vibrate through the stone. This was one of the few times she wished she could see someone’s face. She bet it had been epic. The surprise from the Dai Li agent still traveling with Kuei as well as the two who’d arrived with Long Feng had been expected. But something about it felt… off. It hadn’t been a lie. They had been genuinely shocked, but there was something about the way they’d all recovered so fast that bothered her.

But that wasn’t something she wanted to think about just yet. Right now, she had other things on her mind. Like Katara healing Jet’s friend in the Upper Ring and Li lying hurt in a clinic back in the Lower Ring. Toph was torn. She wanted to stop by to see Li, but she wasn’t sure if dragging Sokka, Aang, and the freaking Earth King with her was the best idea. She also wanted to check on Jet and Katara but…

Wait a second.

“Hey Aang,” she called to her friend who was busy talking animatedly with the Earth King about much fun it was to ride Appa.

“Huh? Yeah, Toph?” he replied, lighting back on the ground with a brush of air.

“Did anyone bother to find out where Katara went to heal Jet’s friend?” she asked. “Because I didn’t.”

And apparently no one else did either if the sudden jump in heartbeat speeds was anything to go by. Toph sighed. “Okay then,” she huffed. “So anyone know where to start looking?”

“Your Majesty!”

Large feet, deep voice, heavy stride, barefoot. Earthbender and military.
“General How!” the Earth King called in a jovial tone. “So nice of you to come out to welcome us back.”

Toph highly doubted that was why the general was frantically running towards them. She’d wager it was more along the lines of relief and fear she and the Avatar might take Kuei on another unofficially sanctioned adventure. She grinned in amusement.

“Your Majesty! Please don’t leave without at least telling someone where you’re going,” the general said sternly, slowing his gate as he approached their group. “No one knew where you were. We were beginning to fear the worst.”

Huh. That was actually true. Weird. What? Did they think Aang was going to kill the Earth King?

A familiar scrape of earth on earth and Toph reevaluated her conclusion. Maybe the general wasn’t afraid of anything Aang would do, but the Dai Li… Okay. Toph wasn’t the best at politics but she understood the signs when someone didn’t trust someone else. She and the gang knew the Dai Li were loyal to Long Feng and weren’t exactly in full support of the Earth King, but she seriously doubted they would outright rebel against Kuei. Heck, they’d even arrested their own leader on Kuei’s orders. That had to count for something.

Right?

“Don’t worry,” Kuei said moving the way some did when they were waving. “I was with the Avatar the whole time, several Guards, and the Dai Li. I was perfectly safe.”

Oh. That was an interesting twitch from both the general and the Dai Li. Okay, yeah, Toph was definitely missing something significant there.

“Besides,” Kuei continued, his voice gaining a more serious quality to it, “I believe there are more important things to take care of at the moment.”

The general tensed and adopted a trademark military attention stance. “I’m at your service, your majesty,” he said respectfully.

“I’ve had Long Feng arrested,” Kuei said simply.

The general rocked back on his heels in shock and his heartbeat spiked. Strangely, the Dai Li’s heartbeat, though harder to detect through those infernal earth shoes, seemed like it stayed steady. Although, there was a slight shift in weight dispersion for a split second.


Oh yeah. There it is, that subtle shift of a bare foot towards the lone Dai Li still with their group. There was definitely a breakdown of trust there. Toph wanted to know more about that rift because she knew a potentially dangerous loose pebble before the rock slide happened.

“It’s true,” Sokka said, swaying as he stepped up next to Aang’s feather-light twinkletoes. “He lied and covered up an attempt by the Fire Nation to break through the Outer Wall. He and the Dai Li,” -oh, that Dai Li agent did not like being brought into this- “are behind concealing the war with the Fire Nation from the Earth King.”

“Are they?” the general said in a way that made it very clear he had been aware of that before Sokka’s announcement.

“But it’s okay now,” Aang said enthusiastically, bouncing into the air just a breath. “With Long
Feng arrested, Kuei can rule Ba Sing Se without opposition.”

Toph was beginning to doubt that.

“And my first act as Earth King in more than just name,” the way Kuei said that was a bit melancholy, “is to begin actively defending Ba Sing Se and taking the offensive against the Fire Nation. I think we’ve been besieged long enough.”

The general relaxed and there was a note of sincerity in his voice when he spoke once more. “Your wish is my command, your majesty,” he declared, dropping to one knee in a show of respect. “I’ll call the Council of Five into a special session. By the way, several Kyoshi Warriors arrived the other day offering an alliance with Ba Sing Se. They have been given guest quarters in the palace until they could meet with you to discuss the terms of their proposed alliance.”

The Earth King shifted but Sokka jumped. “Suki!” he cried cheerfully.

The general stood from his bow. “You know them?” he asked with interest. “Their leader did say her name was Suki.”

“Don’t worry about them,” Sokka declared proudly. “They’re our allies against the Fire Nation.” He turned to Kuei. “You can trust them, your majesty.”

“I see,” Kuei said, sounding both thoughtful and intrigued. “Then I’ll take your word for it. General How, please see to it the Kyoshi Warriors are included in the Council of Five’s war meetings.”

“As you command, your majesty,” General How said, his body shifting in another, shallower bow. Then he paused. “Forgive me, but where is your waterbending friend?”

“She went to help heal a friend of a friend who got hurt fighting a Spirit last night,” Toph said.

The general jolted in surprise and this time looked directly at the lone Dai Li. He didn’t say anything, but something seemed to pass between the general and the Dai Li that Toph could detect and they both relaxed a fraction. Sometimes, Toph wished she could understand how people communicated with their faces. It was frustrating because she couldn’t see it. She hated missing things.

“You wouldn’t happen to know where that friend of a friend is, would you?” Aang asked the general. “We kind of need to talk to her.”

“I don’t. I’m sorry,” the general replied. “But I think I have any idea of who might.”

“Who?” Kuei asked curiously. No one spoke or moved that Toph could feel then the Earth King gasped. “You?”

What just happened?

The lone Dai Li agent shifted awkwardly. “I don’t know, your majesty,” he said respectfully. “But since the injured party is one of ours, I’m sure I’ll find out shortly.”

“I’m guessing that’s where your partner went while we were at the train station earlier,” Toph said.

“It is,” the Dai Li. “We take the care of our own seriously. If something happened to him, we’ll get the full story.”
“I expect to be filled in as well,” Kuei said, startling the Dai Li.

“Y—yes, your majesty,” the agent replied warily.

“Yeah,” Sokka drawled, swaying his weight and Toph caught the sound of skin brushing skin as the Water Tribe boy crossed his arms. “I’ll believe that when I see it. It’s not like you guys are known for your openness, after all.”

Oh, the Dai Li did not like that. It was subtle and if Toph hadn’t been paying attention, she probably would’ve missed it. But for an instant, she felt the agent’s earth shoes shift and his heartbeat spike. It was smothered so quickly and efficiently that Toph almost questioned if she’d really felt it.

“Yeah, about that,” Aang said, sounding vaguely surprised. “Whatever happened to Joo Dee?”

“Which one?” Toph said flatly, paying very close attention to the Dai Li.

“Huh. Good point,” Aang said thoughtfully. “What happened to both of them?”

“I’m afraid I’m not sure what you mean,” the agent said, his voice calm, smooth, and oily. Just like Long Feng’s. Where did they learn to lie so calmly?

“Joo Dee?” Kuei asked in mild interest. “A friend of yours?”

“She was our guide,” Aang explained.

“Before she got replaced by another different Joo Dee,” Sokka added. “Who insisted she was the only Joo Dee, by the way. Suspicious.”

“Two people with the same name?” Kuei said, sounding both curious and thoughtful. “I’ve heard of that happening. I remember reading about the name ‘Li’ being particularly popular recently.”

Toph snorted. “Right. I bet.”

And the Dai Li was being very still. Not a twitch. It was disturbing. Toph bit her lip. She was beginning to think getting rid of Long Feng was just the tip of the mountaintop.

“Dad’s nearby!” Sokka crowed, bouncing excitedly.

He couldn’t wait to tell Katara. She’d be so excited. They both missed their dad so bad. It had been so long since they’d seen him. Now Sokka could look at his father as an official warrior of the Southern Water Tribe and not the small boy the chief had left behind.

Katara would want to show off her new bending talent too. Not to mention Aang. Sokka was looking forward to seeing the awe on his father’s face when they introduced Aang, the Avatar, to him. The hope of the world and their best bet in the war against the Fire Nation. With Aang, Sokka’s knowledge of the solar eclipse, the support of the Earth King and Ba Sing Se, and his father’s fleet, they stood a good chance of defeating the Fire Nation on their home turf.

The Day of Black Sun.

A mighty fine name, if Sokka said so himself. Which he did. They didn’t have much time until the solar eclipse though. They would have to work fast to get everything ready. General How sounded
incredibly interested in the idea and voiced his support. That was one general of the Council of Five down. Just four left.

And now Suki and the Kyoshi Warriors were here too! Ah, he wished he could see Suki. Too bad she was out with the other warriors exploring the gardens. He wanted so badly to say 'hi' and hug her and flirt- *ehm*. Too bad he had other, pressing issues to deal with right now. But when he came back, preferably with his dad, he’d talk with her then and hopefully introduce her to his dad. He wouldn’t miss her then.

In the meantime, considering the documents Long Feng intercepted and hoarded during his too-long stint as Grand Secretariat, Sokka wondered what else had been missed. Had there been other ideas for invasion or offensives against the Fire Nation that never made it to the Earth King or Council of Five’s ears? General How hadn’t found any yet, but Sokka had hopes. If there were other ideas, maybe they could be incorporated into the invasion on the Day of Black Sun. The more the merrier.

But one of the letters found in Long Feng’s study was addressed to Aang. It was from some Guru Pathic person who claimed to know a way for Aang to control the Avatar state. Now Aang was itching to go meet him. Sokka understood, kind of. He’d seen Aang in the Avatar state and it gave him nightmares. If this Guru guy knew how to teach Aang to control all that power, then Sokka was all for it. He didn’t want a repeat of Aang lashing out at them like he had when Appa was taken after they escaped Wan Shi Tong’s library. Creepy cat-owl-thing Spirit.

Then there was Toph’s letter. That had been more unexpected than Aang’s letter. Toph was blind. She couldn’t read. How did her mother expect Toph to read her letter if she couldn’t read? Although, Sokka wouldn’t put it past the little earthbender to figure out a way to pull that off. She ‘saw’ with her feet. Who’s to say she couldn’t find a way to ‘read’ with her fingers?

It was still weird. Earth Kingdom people were weird.

But Sokka saw the look on Toph’s face when she learned the letter was from her mother who was currently *in* Ba Sing Se. It had been surprised and hopeful. Toph wanted to see her mother again and Sokka couldn’t fault her for that. No matter how much Sokka didn’t like her parents. When Sokka left the South Pole with Aang and Katara, they’d left knowing their family was somewhere out there too. But Toph had left her family *behind*.

Sokka hoped the little crazy earthbender got to meet her mom again. After they tracked down Katara and delivered the good news. Once they started the river flowing, they could go do what they each wanted to do.

Which was why they were standing outside some Earth noble’s house waiting for the door to open. Still.

Annoyed, Sokka began tapping his foot impatiently. “What is taking them so long?” he demanded in exasperation.

“Maybe they didn’t hear you,” Aang offered.

“Maybe,” the Water Tribe boy muttered. “Hey Toph. You wanna try knocking?”

The girl grinned and ground a fist in her open hand and Sokka wisely stepped aside. Toph strolled right up to the front door, reared back, then tapped the door delicately with a single finger. The door instantly swung open, just like Sokka’s mouth.
“Nice going!” Aang chirped happily, swooping through the door. “Excuse me,” he called. “Is it okay if we come in?”

The only person present was a servant girl who was staring dumbstruck at the open doors and clinging to the stack of parchment like it was gold. She gulped and looked all around for someone else. Finding no one, she offered a sheepish smile and gulped.

“Aren’t you already in though?” she asked shyly.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Sokka declared, joining Aang and Toph in the front courtyard.

“Considering how rudely you waltzed in here,” a new voice said, accompanied by the appearance of a gorgeous noble girl, “I suppose you’ll take it however you see fit.”

“Hey!” Toph cried, pointing directly at the noble girl. “You’re one of those three girls who-”

“Teased you,” the noble finished curtly, her delicate eyes narrowing at Toph in disdain. “Yes. I remember. I should be furious with you for allowing your friend to scratch my face,” -huh?- “but, considering it led to other… revelations, I’ll settle with doing nothing and calling it even.”

What now? Who scratched who now?


Sokka looked at Toph who had her mouth set in a grim line. “Deal,” she said simply. “Look, we’re looking for Katara. You know, the one who splashed you?”

The noble girl’s gaze sharpened but instead of lashing out like Sokka expected, she just sighed and let her shoulders droop.

“She’s resting,” the girl said. “I can take you to her, but I suggest you don’t wake her. She wore herself out healing.”

Katara wore herself out? Sokka tried to think of a time when he could remember sleeping from exhaustion brought on from bending. It had been a very long time. Ever since the North Pole, Katara had seemed invincible in a way. His little sister, the Master Waterbender who publicly took down Master Pakku, who helped train Aang how to waterbender, and who regularly kept Zuko the jerkbender at bay, was sleeping from bending too much?

Huh. Jet was right. This did sound serious.

“Please,” he said, stepping forward. “Katara’s my sister. I want to make sure she’s alright.”

The noble girl eyed him, her gaze softening somewhat. “I see,” she murmured. “My name is Qiao Yan and this is my home. My parents are out for the day so I’ll be escorting you. Please follow me.”

Without another word, Qiao turned gracefully and strode towards the building to the left. Sokka, Aang, and Toph followed behind, leaving the servant to shut the front door behind them. The building was similar in style to their own place in the Upper Ring just with more darker shades of green. Qiao turned a corner, her pale green dress brushing the floor by her feet, and stopped.

“How is he?” she asked.

Sokka stepped around the corner and froze. The Dai Li from the other night was standing in the
hallway leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and an openly worried expression on his face.

“What’s he doing here?” Sokka demanded.

The sharp jab in the ribs was unexpected and totally not deserved. Neither was that green glare the Dai Li was shooting at him.

“Shanyuan’s his apprentice, Snoozles,” Toph said. “Why wouldn’t he be here?”

“Oh.” Okay, maybe he shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions. “Sorry,” he muttered.

The Dai Li’s glare eased somewhat before returning to Qiao. “He woke up again,” the agent said quietly. “He was a bit more coherent than before, but he didn’t stay awake for long.”

Qiao’s expression softened and she nodded. “Good.” She stepped around the agent and moved to the next door down. “In here,” she said, glancing back at Sokka and his friends.

Opening the door, she lifted a single finger to her lips and stepped aside. Worried, Sokka stepped towards the door, only to stumble back when Aang swept in front of him. Sighing at his friend’s antics, Sokka followed Aang into the room with Toph close behind.

The curtains had been pulled closed over the windows so the room was darker than the hallway. The sole occupant of the room was curled sound asleep on the bed. Aang skipped silently across the floor to Katara’s bedside and knelt to check on her.

“Wow,” the airbender whispered. “She must be really tired.”

She was. Sokka could tell just by looking. His sister’s complexion was paler than usual and there was a hint of purple circles under her eyes. It wasn’t pleasant seeing her like this.

“The guy she was healing,” Sokka said softly, turning to Qiao. “How bad was it?”

The noble’s gaze held Sokka’s for a moment before slipping aside. “Bad,” she whispered. “We were afraid he wouldn’t make it. His friend Li managed to wake him the first couple times he began to slip away. But after he and Jet left, it was up to me, Jin, and Tengfei.”

“Tengfei?”

“Shanyuan’s master,” Qiao said, nodding to the grim Dai Li in the hallway. “As far as I know, that man still hasn’t slept. He must be beyond tired.”

Wow. Yeah, that sounded about right.

Wait. Li? Wasn’t that the name that…

“This Li guy,” Sokka began hesitantly.

“It’s who you think it is,” Toph said from her place behind Sokka in the hallway. “Li’s a nice guy.”

“Yeah, and today’s New Year’s,” Sokka muttered sarcastically. He got a kick in the shin for his trouble.

“He is,” the earthbender insisted. “He’s got a short fuse when you mention his height, but he’s not bad.”
“Who’s not bad?” Aang asked, rejoining their group as Qiao led them out of Katara’s borrowed bedroom.

“Li,” Sokka said, tapping the side of his nose knowingly. “You know. Energetic, huge scar on his face, fiery personality?”

Qiao hummed. “He’s certainly energetic when it comes to his friend,” she agreed. “But he seemed more shy to me than fiery. I didn’t spend much time with him, but he was… determined to say the least.” She frowned. “He was the first one to notice Shanyuan was slipping away from us and pulled him back. I don’t know the full story, but from what Jin and Jet told me, he got rid of the Spirit created by the man who hurt Shanyuan. I’m… in his debt.”

Sokka eyed Qiao suspiciously because that didn’t sound that the noble girl was pleased with the situation. In Li’s debt? In Zuko’s debt? That’s gotta suck. What would the jerkbender even want? Aside from the Avatar in chains and the Fire Nation’s victory in this stupid war?

“I’m guessing the person in the room next door is Shanyuan,” Toph said suddenly.

Qiao blinked and dropped her gaze to the earthbender in mild surprise. “Yes,” she said slowly. “It is. How do you know that?”

Toph tapped the stone floor with her bare foot. “I’m an earthbender,” she said. “I can feel him.” She hesitated, her milky white eyes wider than they were a moment ago. “That’s… really bad. Humans aren’t supposed to feel… soft like that.”

Soft? What did that mean?

Based on Qiao uneasy expression, Sokka wasn’t sure he wanted to know. “He was worse before Katara started healing him,” she said, glancing at the silent Dai Li nearby. “She has a tremendous gift. But even with her ability it will take several days to finish healing Shanyuan to the point I’ll feel comfortable letting him leave without worrying about him.”

“Several days?” Aang gasped, gripping his airstaff in concern. “But… I have to leave soon.”

“It’s okay, Aang,” Toph said, patting the airbender on the shoulder. “I’m staying in Ba Sing Se to meet my mom, remember? You and Sokka go take care of your man stuff.”

“Oh, we will,” Sokka said firmly.

“Man stuff?” Aang parroted in confusion. “I’m just going to see Guru Pathik.”

“And Sokka's going to see his dad,” Toph said. “You and the Guru are guys,” she said, pointing vaguely in Aang’s direction, “and Sokka and his dad are guys,” she pointed vaguely at Sokka. “Man stuff.”

“Solid logic,” Qiao said mildly.

Sokka groaned. “I’ll never understand women.”
Chapter Summary

In which Jet tracks down Li with bad news, Zenko considers making a deal with another mortal, and Li makes a decision that will have results more far-reaching than anyone anticipated.

Chapter Notes


EDIT 2/25/19: Yeesh. Finally reread through this and corrected the errors I could find. I apologize for there being so many. I must have been seriously tired last night to not catch them.

Jet chewed on the stick he’d plucked from one of the trees in Qiao’s courtyard as they road the train to the Lower Ring. He was fretting and he knew it. He’d taken a huge risk by telling Tengfei the truth about Li and all he could do now was pray it had been the right decision. He would never forgive himself if something were to happen to Li because quite frankly, Fire Lord’s son or not, Jet loved him.

Wow. Just thinking that made his face warm. He shifted self-consciously, fervently hoping his face didn’t look as red as it felt. In an effort to distract himself, he glanced at Jin sitting on the train seat next to him.

“You think Tengfei’s gonna get some sleep now that Shanyuan’s mostly out of the woods?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

Jin grimaced and Jet hung his head. Damn. When had the Spirits decided to twist him so much that he now counted a freaking Dai Li as a trusted ally?

“Well, I don’t know about that.”

“Do you think Li will be alright?” Jin asked softly.

This time Jet grimaced and leaned forward to rest his forearms on his thighs, clasping his hands and staring at the floor. Reluctantly, he shook his head and ran a hand through his messy brown hair.

“No, I don’t think so,” he admitted. “But he probably won’t say it. He’s not that kind of person. He’ll be worrying about Shanyuan.”

Jin bit her lip and dropped her gaze to the floor too. “Did he really have to go to the healer’s?” she whispered.
Jet nodded. “Yeah. He’ll probably tell you why if you ask him.”

“This has something to do with his memories, doesn’t it?” she asked, giving him a look out of the corner of her eye. “Did he remember?”

Jet buried his face in his hands and nodded, unable to speak properly.

“Was it that bad?”

Again, he nodded. “For him, anyway.” He lifted his head just enough to see over his fingers and sighed. “He didn’t take it very well.”

He glanced at Jin and could see the calculating gleam in her eyes. “Did you know who he was before he remembered?” she asked.

Rubbing his face before sitting up fully, he just nodded. “I pieced it together from what I’d learned,” he said. “I only figured it out yesterday and,” he clicked his tongue, “we were a bit busy, if you remember. Telling him would have distracted him and that was the last thing we needed.”

The silence hung heavy as the train rumbled through the Lower Ring to their stop. They both disembarked together, making their way down to the city streets below. Once they set foot on the dirt road, Jin turned to go the opposite direction from the Autumn Leaf Clinic, startling Jet.

“Where you going?” he called.

“My home,” Jin said.


“No, thank you though,” Jin chirped. “I’ll meet you back at Qiao’s. You have your messenger badge?”

Jet patted his pocket where the official, sealed document rested. “Good luck,” he said, tossing the girl a two fingered salute.

“You too,” Jin said before turning and vanishing in the crowd.

Rolling his shoulders, Jet made his way to Roulan’s clinic, crossing his fingers Li would be in a better state of mind then the one he’d left him in. He knocked once before stepping into the clinic and looking around.

“He’s in the back,” a voice from next to him said, startling him.

Jumping slightly, Jet bit too hard on his stick and it snapped. “Master Xiu,” he said, recognizing the waterbender. “Geez. Don’t give me a heart attack.” He huffed in mild annoyance when the waterbender just grinned. “Whatever. How’s Li?”

“Better,” Master Xiu said, getting to his feet and stretching. “He’s awake now and seems to be coming to terms with what he learned.”

Right. Master Xiu knew who Li really was. Jet tucked his hands in his pockets and fingered the hilts of his hook swords.

“Can I see him?” he asked softly.
The waterbender’s smile eased. “I’m sure he’d like that.”

Whelp, no more procrastinating. Drawing a deep breath, Jet made his way to the back patio. Li was up just as Master Xiu said, but he wasn’t talking. Nor was he alone. He was sitting cross legged on the flagstones of the back patio with his eyes closed and his palms resting on his knees. Sitting across from him was Mushi who sat in the same position. Together, the two firebenders simply breathed in and out. Slow, deep breathes that made Jet want to yawn.

Zenko was curled in Li’s lap so her tails covered her nose. Both of her ears flipped up when she noticed Jet’s presence but she didn’t move otherwise. Than, however, did move. The potter looked up from where he sat between Mushi and Li and raised his hand in a silent greeting. When Than waved him over, Jet took a seat on the stone across from Than and between Mushi and Li. Glancing at the two firebenders curiously, he met Than’s gaze and lifted an eyebrow.

Than shrugged and mouthed, “Meditation.”

Jet nodded and glanced surreptitiously at Li. This was probably a bad idea, but Li was just too cute Jet couldn’t resist. Leaning close, Jet planted a quick kiss on Li’s scarred ear and was pleasantly surprised by the reaction. Li’s entire body jolted as if shocked and his face burned bright red. Golden eyes flew open and whipped to Jet’s shamelessly grinning face.

“J-Jet?” Li squeaked.

“Hey sexy,” Jet teased, enjoying the way Li’s cheeks got even darker. “How’re you doing?”

Li let his gaze slip away and bit his lip. “Better,” he whispered. “I’m sorry about this morning.”

“Sorry for what?” Jet asked in genuine confusion. He leaned back to get a good look at the expression on Li’s face. Was that shame? “You didn’t do anything. And even if you did,” he added, “I wouldn’t have blamed you. I did kind of spring that on you.” He winced. “And even if I hadn’t done it that way, I get it wasn’t the best news of the century.”

It was subtle, but Li was smiling. It was small and wry but it was a smile nonetheless. Proud, Jet nudged his boyfriend with his shoulder and waggled his eyebrows suggestively. Predictably, Li scoffed and rolled his eyes. But his smile was bigger and that’s all that mattered.

“Well hello again Jet,” Mushi said, startling both boys. His smile was wide and friendly. “I take it focusing will be difficult now, hm?”

Li had the grace to blush and Zenko made that chittering sound Jet had come to recognize as her version of laughter. Jet grinned without shame.

“Can’t say I’m sorry,” he said earning him a gleeful chuckle from the old general turned tea maker.

“No, I don’t suppose you can,” Mushi said giving Jet a cheeky grin.

Jet really liked this weird old man. He glanced at Than who was also smiling. But the potter’s smile was softer and perhaps a bit melancholy. Jet couldn’t imagine what was going through the Earth Kingdom man’s head. A part of Jet wished Than could have been there for him before he made that grave mistake of destroying the dam. If he had, then maybe Jet would never have lost so much of his sanity.

Mushi patted Than on the back and something passed between the two men’s gazes. Huh. Well, what do you know? They must have had a serious talk while Jet was away. Whatever it had been about, it seemed the two men had found good middle ground.
“How’s Shanyuan?” Li asked, turning back to Jet with wide-eyed concern. “Is he…” The firebender swallowed thickly and one of his hands clutched Zenko’s fur. “Did he-”

“He survived the night,” Jet said, all the joy that had built up suddenly vanishing at the grim reminder of their Dai Li friend. He glanced at Mushi before continuing. “I got Katara to heal him. She’s the best waterbender I know. If anyone can help him, she can.”

Li visibly paled and ducked his head. “I… I see,” he murmured.

“Katara is a very powerful waterbender indeed,” Mushi said unexpectedly, drawing everyone’s gaze to his serious expression. “She is a powerful warrior and a healer with a heart. There are not many who would willingly and knowingly heal a,” he glanced around warily and lowered his voice, ”a firebender as she did for me when I was wounded.”

“She healed you?” Li asked curiously. Jet squeezed his boyfriend’s shoulder as Zenko lifted her head and faced Mushi with interest. “What happened?”

“Was it at the abandoned village?” Jet asked, frowning.

“It was, yes,” Mushi said, bowing his head. “We had an argument, you and I,” he said to Li. “I have learned over the years to leave you be when you needed to clear your head. One of the follies of being a firebender is the temper.”

Jet could agree with that. Every firebender Jet had ever met had been easily stirred up to rage. Rage made the benders react without thinking things through, it made them stupid. That was something Jet and his fellow Freedom Fighters took advantage of often. Jet had even created a special team whose sole duty was to taunt firebenders as a distraction while the real strike team took the benders down from behind in sneak attacks. An angry firebender was dangerous, but they were also debatably at their weakest.

Wait a second. Firebenders got angry easily. That was fact. So why could Jet not remember a time when he’d seen Li angry? He’d seen Li frustrated, annoyed, and aggravated, but never furious. He glanced at Than and was met by the same realization and resulting confusion. Neither of them had ever seen Li furious.

“That is why we must meditate,” Mushi continued, closing his eyes and drawing a deep breath. He sighed it out through his nose and visibly relaxed his body. “Meditation clears the mind of distractions and allows us to focus our thoughts and chi on our goal, whatever that might be.”

:Li has been meditating often.: Zenko said suddenly, her unnatural blue eyes open and focused on Mushi. :That was somewhat my fault.: She turned and lifted her furry snout up to gaze at Li’s face upside down. :I did not realize how important sleep was to Humans. I had always thought it was a choice, not a requirement for survival.: 

“Is that what Li was doing during the night?” Than asked the kitsune. “When you would take him to see Wan Shi Tong? He was meditating?”

“Visit the Knowledge Spirit?” Mushi repeated cautiously. “From where?”

“Many nights after we first arrived in Ba Sing Se,” Than explained, turning to Mushi, “my wife and I noticed Li was increasingly exhausted during the day even though, to our knowledge, he would sleep all night.”

:It was Ying who informed me of the necessity of sleep.: Zenko said, opening her mouth and letting out small satisfied chirrrups as Li scratched the fur behind her ears.
“You didn’t know,” Li said, offering the fox Spirit a smile. “You don’t need sleep.”

:True,: Zenko said, sneezing suddenly. :But I do find it refreshing.:  

“Meditation can offer peace and rejuvenation of the mind, that is true,” Mushi said cautiously, “but it should never be used in place of true sleep.” He clasped his hands in his lap as he thought on his next question with care. “How did you guide my nephew to Wan Shi Tong’s layer? The Knowledge Spirit’s library is said to be lost in the sands of the Si Wong Desert.”

Zenko opened her mouth, revealing her teeth in what Jet suspected was a sly grin. :Your nephew is capable of a form of astral projection,: she said.

Jet had to bite back the laughter that threatened to explode from him at the utterly gobsmacked expression on Mushi’s face. Than looked as confused as Jet was. Neither of them knew what astral projection was, but if Mushi’s reaction was anything to go by, it was certainly an impressive feat.

Amber eyes locked on Li’s pale gold and Jet finally did end up snickering when he saw the deep blush in his boyfriend’s cheeks. Shyly, Li ducked his head and focused his attention on petting Zenko’s fluffy gray-black fur.

:He cannot do it alone as of yet,: Zenko said, wagging two of her tails in pleasure form Li’s ministrations. :But he will be able to soon. He needs more practice with someone who can safeguard his spirit and body during the trek. It is likely he will never be capable of treks as far as Wan Shi Tong’s library without assistance, but shorter-range treks will soon be within his abilities.:  

That sounded… Jet’s proud smile began to fade as he actually tried to process what the fox Spirit was implying. He’d always thought Li visited Wan Shi Tong’s library before coming to Ba Sing Se and communicated with the Spirit through Zenko. Jet had no idea where the library actually was, nor was he particularly aware of the finer details of geography outside Ba Sing Se or his Freedom Fighters’ hunting range. But he did know where the Si Wong Desert was and it was nowhere near Ba Sing Se.

“Li,” he asked, waiting until he had Li’s full attention, “when was the last time you visited Wan Shi Tong in person or,” he waved at Zenko, “like what she just described?”

The tea waiter thought for a moment. “A couple days ago,” he said. “It was the night I…” He flushed. “The night I told you about my bending.”

Thrown, Jet leaned back and stared at Li in disbelief. “How the hell did you manage that?” he demanded.

“I needed to speak to Professor Zei,” Li said, rolling his shoulders self-consciously. “The professor had been with the Avatar when they visited Wan Shi Tong’s library.”

“The Avatar has been to the library?” Mushi wondered aloud, rubbing his beard thoughtfully. “That is good news. I have heard there is much to learn there.” He sighed dreamily. “How I would love to visit that wondrous place.”

“I doubt Wan Shi Tong would let you,” Li said with grim finality. “Another firebender made it there first and burned the entire wing of his library dedicated to the history of the Fire Nation to ash. He’s banned all Humans from entering his library ever again. Besides me,” he added, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

Jet winced and knew his own revulsion at such a significant loss of history and information was
reflected on both Than and Mushi’s faces. Reading and writing may not come as easily to Jet as he would prefer, but he knew they were important to society. Passing information by word-of-mouth wasn’t always reliable unless it was hammered into each new student’s thick skull word for word. As far as Jet knew, only songs were all but guaranteed to be remembered that way. Spoken word, not so much.

“At least the great Spirit allowed the Avatar entrance,” Mushi said, obviously disturbed by the forbidding news. Li cleared his throat and amber eyes narrowed. “Nephew? What aren’t you telling me?”

Oh. Shit. Jet thought back to Aang’s casual destruction of the farmland in the Agrarian Ring and grimaced. “I think I can see where this is going,” he said, glancing down at Zenko. “I’m guessing that’s when it happened?”

The fox Spirit growled, her clear blue eyes glancing at him. :It was:;

“What happened?” Than asked, glancing between Li, Jet, and Zenko suspiciously. “The Avatar is the bridge between our world and the Spirits’. What could he possibly do to offend them?”

“He lied to Wan Shi Tong,” Li said softly. “Then one of his companions stole from the library.”

“This is dark news,” Mushi said, his amber eyes heavy with understanding. “To deliberately lie and steal from a Spirit is not something easily forgiven or forgotten.”

:\No Humans are allowed entrance to Wan Shi Tong’s library for as long as he sees fit,: Zenko said firmly, swishing her tails. :Except for Li.:”

“But then,” Li added wryly, “I’m not really, well, Human when I visit so that’s probably the loophole he’s working with.”

:\True enough,: Zenko agreed, her foxy grin returning.

“I didn’t believe it when I first heard it,” Li said, looking up at Than and Mushi with pleading eyes. “I only wanted to know the truth from someone who wasn’t invested in either side of the argument.”

Than seemed thunderstruck, still mulling over the news of the Avatar’s failure to respect a deal with a Spirit. Mushi, however, nodded slowly.

“A wise choice,” the old man said. “But why did you need to go to the library to speak to this Professor Zei? If no Human is allowed into the library, than-”

“He’s dead,” Li said.

Mushi gaped. Amber eyes flashed to Jet who shrugged.

“Don’t look at me,” he said. “I didn’t know about that,” he nodded to Li, “but I knew he could talk to ghosts. Sort of. I saw him deal with the Kuchisake-onna and her children. Helped out even. It doesn’t surprise me that he tried it before.”

Freaked him the hell out, but didn’t surprise him.

:\The professor is not a ghost,: Zenko said, placing a dainty paw on Li’s leg and hopping up from his lap to sit perfectly on his knee gazing at Mushi. :He is a lesser Spirit now. He lives in the library with more knowledge than he would ever have been able to learn in a single mortal
She tilted her head, her red tipped gray ear twitching. *It was the only boon the head of my house was willing to offer,* she continued. *The professor chose to remain in the library knowing he would die simply because he could not bring himself to leave all the knowledge behind. Such dedication to learning was not something Wan Shi Tong could ignore. The professor is now a member of Wan Shi Tong’s house.* She grinned. *He is very useful in understanding the complexities of Humanity.*

“I have no doubt,” Mushi breathed, his amber eyes still wide in awe. “That is a great gift.”

*It is,* Zenko said, tilting her head slightly in agreement. *But it is not one Wan Shi Tong has come to regret.*

“Humans can become Spirits?” Than gasped, stunned by the revelation. Not that Jet could blame him. He wasn’t sure he could fully grasp that either. A Human was flesh and blood, mortal. Spirits were something else, something unexplainable, immortal.

“I mean, I’ve heard of Spirits becoming Human,” Than said quickly. “The Avatar is a perfect example of that. But I had no idea the opposite was true as well. Can Humans really become Spirits?”

*Some,* Zenko confirmed, turning her eerie gaze to the potter. *You should not be so surprised, Than. You pray to Oma and Shu, do you not?*

“Well yes but…” Than’s brown eyes bugged in astonishment. “They were Human—”

*And are now Spirits,* Zenko said, dipping her chin. *They serve as lieutenants and messengers for the Great Spirit Yu Huang.*

“So the histories tell us,” Mushi said, nodding and rubbing his bread in deep thought. “I admit, I have read of such tales but I did not give them as much credence as I see I should have. I always thought the tales were metaphorical, not literal.”

*A common mistake,* Zenko said, cocking her head and closing her mouth. *Though I am interested in how you came by such information. There are not many copies of the manuscripts you speak of.*

“I have not read the originals,” Mushi said. “The few originals we have are kept under strict lock and key in secret crypts for protection. I have only read copies.”

Zenko’s ears flipped full forward, alert. *Perhaps you would consider donating those originals to the head of my house for safe keeping,* she said.

The old man smiled. “I will consider it,” he said, a sly gleam in his amber eyes. “But what would I be given in return?”

Zenko stiffened, then sat back on her haunches, wrapping her tails around her paws in thought. *You are a clever man,* she said.

“I take that as a compliment,” Mushi said, chuckling.

*Do.*

The kitsune lifted her unnatural gaze to Li who had been following the conversation silently. She nudged Li’s chin with her nose and Jet suspected she was speaking to him silently. A few seconds
later, the fox spirit turned back to Mushi.

:I believe I know what society you belong to, old dragon,: she said. :I will tell you now that the head of my house has no interest in war or the conflicts of mortals. His interest lies only in knowledge. He will not deal with the Avatar since the bridge has shown himself to be untrustworthy.:

The old tea maker’s eyes darkened but he nodded in understanding.

:However,: Zenko continued. :I will pass on your offer. If Wan Shi Tong sees fit to trade, then I and Li will act as intermediaries.: Speaking of information. Jet stiffened. Damn it all. He’d completely forgotten the whole reason why he came down here in the first place.

“Li, think you can come back with me to Qiao’s place?” he asked, drawing the attention of pale gold. “Tengfei thinks that-”

He cut off abruptly, glancing around them to be absolutely sure no unwanted listeners were nearby. Than and Mushi didn’t count. Leaning close, he lowered his voice just in case.

“Tengfei thinks there’s someone in the Earth Palace who shouldn’t be there,” Jet said. “How much of your past do you remember?”

Li blinked, his gaze drifting to the side as he mentally shuffled through his memories. It was disappointing to see him shake his head and say, “Not much. I remember enough, but not as much as I would prefer.”

Now for the hard part. “Think you’d be able to recognize someone on sight?” Jet asked.

“It depends,” Li said slowly, a frown working its way onto his face. “Who would I have to identify?”

Jet glanced at Mushi, then at Than, before sighing and meeting Li’s gaze straight on. “It’s Azula. Tengfei thinks she’s in the palace.”

Li’s face drained of all color and he looked like he was going to faint from terror.

“It may be nothing,” Jet said quickly. “But Tengfei said there’s a girl there with eyes like yours. Calls herself ‘Suki’ but Tengfei doesn’t buy it.”

“If Azula is here,” Mushi said suddenly, horror in his voice, “then I must leave with all due haste. As should you and your family,” he said directly to Than. “Even with all the strength I could muster backed by my nephew’s, we would likely be unable to stop her. As Li is now,” he smiled gently at his distraught nephew, “she would kill him. We are both wanted dead by the Fire Lord but it is Li who stands between her and the Dragon Throne.”

“I can’t take the throne,” Li whispered almost too softly to hear.

Mushi blinked, then smiled. “Your banishment was for the crime of saving innocent lives,” the old general said. “You have a heart. That is a strength, not a weakness.”

“You don’t understand,” Li said, lifting his head and meeting his uncle’s gaze sadly. “I wasn’t sure before, but I am now. It’s not that I don’t want the throne.” He winced. “Even though I don’t really.” He shook himself. “It’s that I can’t take the throne. I can’t be Fire Lord.”
“Of course, you can,” Mushi said, a fierceness to his voice that hadn’t been there before. “You must.”

Jet followed the conversation as best he could but he was beginning to suspect there was a whole lot more nuances here than what he could catch. Mushi was beginning to look less and less like an old tea maker and more like a weathered general. Li, his shy boyfriend, sat facing the general with sadness but a firm, immovable strength Jet recognized in the faces of earthbenders on par with Shanyuan and Tengfei. Li wasn’t lying, no surprise there, but he was also not stating an opinion. He was stating an indisputable fact.

“Why can’t you be Fire Lord?” Jet asked, hoping his interruption was the right decision.

Pale gold turned to his earthen brown and Li smiled in quiet misery. “Because I made a deal with Wan Shi Tong,” he said. “I can’t be the Fire Lord because I promised to be a Fire Sage.”

“The head of the Fire Sages was chosen by the Avatar to be the Fire Lord,” Mushi said, a hint of desperation in his voice.

“Wait, what?” Jet gasped. “Really? The Avatar made the first Fire Lord?!”

“But as things are now, I cannot be both a Fire Sage and the Fire Lord,” Li said. His golden gaze locked on Mushi. “I refuse.”
Chapter Summary

In which Iroh does not agree with this but Li refuses to bow to the Dragon of the West and turns to the Dragon of the East for support and a request.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I sincerely apologize for the delay. Between my new job, closing on a house, and general insanity, I'm running painfully low on free time. I had to write this chapter over several days instead of my usual one sitting. That's why it took so long. I'll do my best to try to start updating quicker again, but I have to get my life into something resembling order first.

That said, I'll edit this tomorrow because I have a 5:30am wake-up call from work and it hurts me.

“You cannot refuse!” Iroh cried fiercely, his voice carrying hints of the fear that glittered in his wide amber eyes. “You are the Crown Prince. If you refuse then Azula will be next in line.”

“So be it,” Li said, strangely calm.

Iroh’s eye grew wide with horror but Li forced himself to ignore it. He knew he was right. He couldn’t change the truth. He couldn’t be the new Fire Lord. He had to find the new Fire Lord. Agni help him, he knew that. It was as if the knowledge had been thrust into his mind overnight.

Had the Kuchisake-onna Spirit done more than speak to him before she vanished last night?

Speaking of...

“Uncle,” Li said before the old man could speak. “The Spirit from the other night told me something before she vanished.” Iroh closed his mouth reluctantly but nodded, quietly requesting Li to continue. “I asked her why she chose me to help her instead of the Dai Li. She said…” He bit his lip. “She implied that I’m… That I’m a descendant of an Avatar. Is that true?”

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled accompanied by the familiar unease he’d grown used to whenever Zenko opened her eyes. He couldn’t look at her. He held Iroh’s gaze instead, refusing to look away. He was tired of tip-toeing around what he didn’t know and what he wanted to know. It was time to find his footing and stand firm.

“Is it true?” he demanded when Iroh didn’t answer quickly enough.

Next to him, Jet shifted and rested a hand on one of Li’s knees. It was surprising how such a simple thing could help ease the tension away from his shoulders. If Uncle Iroh wouldn’t or couldn’t answer his question, then Li would find out another way. Supposedly the current Avatar was
connected to every Avatar that came before them. Li had saved the current Avatar’s life once. If he had to, Li could track the current Avatar down and ask him if he knew the truth.

But then the old firebender sighed, his shoulders drooping as if a heavy weight had settled on them. “I wished to keep that knowledge from you until you were ready to understand it,” Iroh said in a weary voice.

The air left Li in a soft sigh. “It’s true then,” he whispered in what wasn’t quite a question.

“It is,” Iroh answered with a slow nod. “Your father, Fire Lord Ozai,” Li tried not to flinch, “is the son of Fire Lord Azulon and grandson of Fire Lord Sozin.”

Li swallowed thickly, feeling Jet’s hand on his knee tighten. He couldn’t help but reach down and twine his fingers with Jet’s, seeking the comfort they offered.

“Your mother, Lady Ursa, came from a small village in the Fire Nation,” Iroh continued. “Both of her parents were herbalists, but Ursa’s mother was the child of Ta Min and,” Iroh’s dark amber gaze lifted to Li’s pale gold, “of Avatar Roku.”

It was very difficult to swallow. Li felt small and, strangely, betrayed. His gaze dropped to his lap a moment before fur and unnatural, endless blue filled his vision.

She knew.

:I suspected:.

Why hadn’t she told him?

Zenko tilted her head, twitching her tails. :Without proof?; she countered. :Besides,: she added softly, :even if I had proof, would it have made a difference?:

Li felt his heart hurt. He would have understood why the Kuchisake-onna Spirit had been so obsessively drawn to him. Then he paled in horrible realization. Agni have mercy! Wan Shi Tong must have known too.

Yes. Wan Shi Tong would have known, and yet the Knowledge Spirit had still trusted him, made a deal with him, and welcomed Li into his House. In, hold, out. He shouldn’t be angry with Zenko. He knew where claiming something without proof could land him. He grimaced, remembering his escape from the Dai Li’s base on the back of that six-legged, furry monster.

Clearing his throat awkwardly, he closed his eyes and winced. He really was sorry. He hadn’t meant to snap at her.

:It is well,: Zenko said, nudging his chin with her damp nose. :You may be a descendant of Avatar Roku, but you are not the Avatar himself. Nor are you bound by the Avatar’s duties or,: she sniffed, :his follies,:.

Despite his exhaustion, Li snorted. That was a relief. He honestly couldn’t imagine stealing from a Spirit of any kind. Just the thought of it made his hackles rise in fearful disgust.

“Li?”

Than. Lifting his head, Li looked to his Earth uncle and managed a weak smile. “Um, surprise?” he said shyly.
The hand clutching his tightened a second before Li felt scraggly brown hair brush his chin and Jet’s warm face press against his neck. Li’s cheeks burned in embarrassment but he didn’t resist the desire to run his thumb over the back of Jet’s hand. Then he heard the chuckles and his shy smile became a mildly annoyed grimace.

“‘Surprise?’” Jet gasped between laughter. “Spirits damn it, Li.” He sat up and nudged Li’s shoulder with his own. “You find out you’re Avatar Roku’s great-grandson and all you can think to say is ‘surprise’?”

Jet leaned back and collapsed into mad cackling. Li pressed his lips together in a thin line, eyeing Jet’s nonsense dryly. Then Zenko’s amused gekkering joined in and Li flushed hotly.

“You’re both horrible,” he muttered under his breath before glancing apprehensively at Than.

The potter had sat back so he could see the entire scene, his brown eyes wary but thoughtful. When they caught Li’s hopeful gold, they softened. After a moment, Than huffed a chuckle of his own.

“To be honest, Li,” Than began with a careless shrug, “so much has happened since you joined our little family that I’ve just about accepted that I’m living a Spirit tale.”

Li ducked his head and quietly admitted to himself that yes, this was all probably very much not normal. Warily, he wondered how much of that was due to his true identity, his incarnated Spirit of an ancestor, or his own bad luck? Probably a combination of the three.

“Be that as it may,” Iroh said, startling Li from his thoughts, “I must beg you to reconsider your withdrawal from the line of succession.”

Li drew in a deep breath, held it for three seconds to calm his racing heart, and let it out slowly. Dropping his gaze to Zenko in his lap, Li ran the fingers of his free hand through her gray-black fur, fluffing the tufts of red at the tips of her ears and cheeks. If saying the words weren’t enough, then he’d make another deal.

The kitsune’s ears instantly flipped up and her tails stilled, staring up at him in wide-eyed disbelief. There would be no turning back if he did this.

What the hell. Like there was any turning back now anyway.

…true. But a deal of this magnitude would last for much longer than any deal Li had ever made. Was he ready for the consequences of such an act?

If this was what he had to do in order for his words to truly be taken seriously, then so be it. Besides, it wasn’t like he wasn’t going to do the same thing anyway, deal or no deal. And wasn’t it a Fire Sage’s duty to carry out the will of the Spirits?

But should he fail-

He wouldn’t.

But if he did… If he died before he had the chance to complete the deal…

If he died before then, then this world would likely go to hell anyway.

Zenko’s ears drooped, flattening against her head as her eyes slipped shut. She nuzzled his palm gently, licking his fingers before stepping out of his lap. She wasn’t answerable to the Spirit Li was about to beseech nor was this her deal. She could not be with him. He would have to do this alone.
Standing, Li looked directly at Iroh, his uncle. The man had been there for him so often over the past three years that going against the elder tugged at his heartstrings. Yet, Li knew he wasn’t the person he once was. He might never be that person again and, as terrifying as that thought was, it was also comforting. From what he could remember, he didn’t like who he had become. Anger. Hurt. Pain. Loss. Loneliness. Failure. Inadequacy. He didn’t want to feel those emotions so strongly ever again.

He wasn’t sure he would survive it.

This was the right thing to do. Even if it wasn’t what his uncle wanted him to do.

“If my words aren’t enough to stop you from trying to change my mind or my path, uncle,” he said calmly, feeling a heaviness settle in his stomach, “then I will make sure you are unable to interfere.”

Old amber eyes narrowed warily. “Nephew,” Iroh said slowly, “think before you act.”

“I have,” Li replied. “I have made my choice and acknowledged the truth. It is you who refuse to do the same.”

“Azula will ruin the Fi-” Slamming his mouth shut, Iroh closed his eyes and drew a deep, calming breath. “She will be the destruction of our home,” he said finally, opening his eyes once more. “I beg you, reconsider.”

His shoulders drooped slightly in dismay, but Li drew strength from Jet’s steady presence and the patient silence of Than on his other side. Than had never known Li as Zuko. He never knew the banished Crown Prince who lived like an open wound that refused to heal. He had only ever known Li as Li, and that was oddly comforting.

Jet had never known Li as Zuko either, yet he also continued to be the steady presence Li had come to rely on more than he ever realized. Even with all of the revelations, the Spirit madness, the blood and death, Jet stood by Li’s side. Than would be the home Li could always return to; where Ying and little Hope would welcome him with open arms, bright, forgiving smiles, and endless love. But Jet would follow him into the thick of the inferno and make sure he didn’t fall.

“You’re going to do something stupid again, aren’t you?” Jet whispered.

Heat filled his cheeks but he couldn’t fight back the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I wouldn’t call it stupid,” he whispered back. “Just… headstrong.”

Jet snorted a laugh and rested his forehead against Li’s with a dramatic sigh. “What am I going to do with you?” he moaned with a grin. “Tengfei is not going to be pleased.”

Li’s face twisted into a sour expression much to Jet’s amusement. “He’s not my babysitter,” he grumbled. After a moment, Jet’s smile slipped and Li felt the weight of what he was about to do. “Don’t let him stop me,” Li murmured.

Jet was silent but the gleam in his eyes when he glanced significantly at Iroh was answer enough. Stepping back, Li let his hands free themselves of Jet’s hair and fingers before turning and stepping out into the grass in the center of the healer’s garden. The sun was bright in the clear sky overhead. There were a few small clouds on the horizon and the humidity from the bay just beyond the city
hung heavy in the air, hinting at the chance of an afternoon storm. For some reason, the thought of lightning dancing across the sky filled him with a strange giddiness.

Tilting his head back to stare up into the endless blue, Li looked as close to the sun as he dared. Lifting his hands to his waist, palms up in supplication, he began to pray. “Agni,” he murmured, his voice nearly lost in the dull murmur of the city of Ba Sing Se. “Dragon of the Eastern Sky and Lord of the Western Sky, I humbly ask you hear my prayer.”

It might have been his mind playing tricks on him, it might have been a shift in shadow, or perhaps the sunlight grew just slightly brighter and warmer on his cheeks.

“I have sworn myself to a deal with Wan Shi Tong,” he continued, “a deal which I will not break. He has offered me a place in his house for however long it takes me to complete my tasks. But I am first and foremost a child of Fire.” Letting his eyes close, he breathed. “I ask you for your trust and your guidance. I wish to make a deal with you.”

Sounds faded to a low hum in his ears, the air was hot and still, the sun warm and soothing on his skin.

“Through my deal with Wan Shi Tong, I swore to become a Fire Sage,” Li said. “For this reason, I cannot be the new Fire Lord.” He opened his eyes and gazed up into the sky. “But I do have a say in the identity of the true Fire Lord. If you accept this deal or not, I ask that you hear and witness these words.”

Jet was near. Than was near. Zenko was near. Iroh was near. Too near. But Li would not be stopped.

“I reject Ozai as Fire Lord,” Li said into the humid air which sang with the presence of a Spirit beyond comprehension. “I do not, nor will I ever accept him as leader of and your representative to the Fire Nation. His crimes are not just against Water, Earth, and Air, but against Fire as well. He has sullied our Flame with this war and his rejection of you as the true leader of our people. Thus, I reject him.”

It was getting hard to breathe in the thick, hot air.

“I refuse the throne,” Li continued in a softer voice. “I refuse to break my word. But there is another who is worthy of your notice, of your approval. It will not be easy, nor will it be quick. But fire can burn slow and cool as often as it can burn quick and hot.”

Deep breath.

“Help me,” he asked. “Help me find the one you wish to be the Fire Lord. Whoever they are, even if you choose Azula, I swear I will do whatever is in my power to ensure they take and hold the Dragon Throne. Do this for me,” don’t falter, “and I give you my word that I will establish a place where sages of the four elements can study, grow, and live in peace. A place devoted to you but balanced by the other Great Spirits, and to Wan Shi Tong. Knowledge must be kept persevered, taught, and spread to all. I will teach the Dance of the Phoenix to those of Fire who seek to follow the path of the Fire Sage.”

He breathed. “I give you my word, and I ask for this deal.”

The silence was heavy, the heat cloying and thick like a physical sensation, threatening to drown him and burn him alive. But he felt no fear, only a tenuous, fragile hope bolstered by determination and sheer, stubborn will. He wanted this deal but he needed Agni’s support.
This war had to end. It had to be stopped. If Spirits like the Woman in White were changing so dramatically from human malevolence, then it was long past time to stop this. The Fire Nation could succeed and wipe out every element but Fire, then wither away and die. Or the Fire Nation could lose and be overrun and destroyed by rightfully angry people seeking revenge for their hurts and losses. Either way, the Fire Nation would ultimately lose. Fire would vanish.

But as long as there was a single ember, weak but still hot, then Fire could return like the Phoenix Agni’s chosen people represented. The dance would start anew. Birth, life, death, rebirth. Endless. Just as the sun rose, burned in the day, set, smoldered in the night, only to rise again the next day.

“Dragon of the Sun,” Li pleaded, closing his eyes when they began to burn, “guide me, guide us. Help us be your Phoenix once again. Please. I will be your servant, your hand to act when you need me, your feet to go where you need me, I will be the Phoenix to your Dragon.”

Fire.

Breathe.

It was everywhere and nowhere and every when and now when. Time meant nothing. Change was natural here. Fire never stayed the same. It couldn’t. To do so was to die. For some reason, the thought of a single flame being snuffed into smoke brought tears to Li’s eyes. A flame was a heart; fire burned, the heart beat. Fire was life. Without fire, there was no life.

He understood!

He understood and it was burning him alive. It was more than he could comprehend, more than he could handle, more than he was ever meant to handle. He saw the world and wept for it as flame after tiny flame was snuffed out, some before they even had the chance to spark into being.

Then he no longer understood, he just understood. The presence was gone, but not completely. Never completely. Just farther away. The air wasn’t as thick, the heat wasn’t as intense, and his eyes were no longer blinded.

He had his answer. He had his deal. Nothing could change that now. Agni himself had deigned to lend Li his support and guidance. He would be a Fire Sage, learn the Dance of the Phoenix, and create a place where Fire sages could find solace, and where Wan Shi Tong would feel welcome. There should always be more than one library, after all.

Swallowing over his dry throat, Li turned to where Iroh, Than, and Jet stood. Than’s eyes were wide in awe and Jet was clearly unnerved. But one look at Li’s face and Jet smiled. It was small and hesitant, but firm and steady.

Iroh was the last one Li looked at, fearing what he might see. The elderly man’s eyes were wide with shock, but his expression was grim with disappointed resignation. For some reason, Li felt his heart plummet in his chest when he saw the disappointment there. But he would not change his mind or go back on his word.

“I’m sorry.”

It was all he could say. His words were lost to him.

Jet scoffed, breaking the tension. “Well,” he said, reaching out to pluck a sprig of mint from one of the shrubs nearby and sticking it into his mouth, “if Tengfei wasn’t going to kill you before, he’ll definitely kill you now.”
Ah. Yes. That was not something Li was looking forward to.

“Better make it quick then,” he said, striding towards his boyfriend. He paused to hug Than. “I’ll be back this evening. I’ll explain everything then. I promise.”

He stepped back and turned to Iroh. He started to reach out to rest a hand on his uncle’s shoulder, but hesitated, curling his fingers back and looking away.

“I am sorry,” he whispered.

Something pawed at his pants and Li lowered his hands so Zenko could hop into them then bound onto his shoulders. Slipping his hand into Jet’s, he began to leave.

“Let’s go see Shanyuan,” he said.

Jet squeezed his hand and led the way through the clinic and out into the sunlit street.
Something Odd

Chapter Summary

In which Jet sees nothing wrong with this, Jin does have a problem with this, and Li attempts to fix a problem before diving into yet another one.

Chapter Notes

EDIT 5/13/19: I reread and edited this and all I can say is how sorry I am for the errors. I found and corrected as many as I could find. If you find any more, please let me know.

A/N: Been a while. Missed y'all. Sorry. A lot's been happening. I got a new job, a new place, in the middle of moving, trying to keep my head above water, a new dog.... I have no life except on the weekends. I'm burned out, but want to write. It's a terrible position to be in.

BTW, the technique Li uses in the second half of the chapter on Shanyuan is a canon technique. It is only shown once in the Legend of Korra series two-part episode "Spirits." When Korra washes ashore on the strange Fire Nation island where Fire Sages live, a female Fire Sage uses this technique to discover Korra was infected by a malicious Spirit. An island of Fire Sages with an interesting canon history. Hmmm~

The return ride to Qiao’s place was quiet. Jin seemed to pick up on the mood and respected the silence. Li sat between her and Jet holding Jin’s bag so she could hold her small shrine. The shrine was nothing more than a small stone bowl that looked to be hand carved and filled halfway with sand. A couple stone candle holders sat nestled in the sand alongside a rolled up piece of cloth.

Jet didn’t have to see it to know what was written on the cloth. It would be the names and painted faces of Jin’s parents. He had one just like it, before he lost it. Before his Freedom Fighters had forced him to leave without it. Yet another reason why that event hurt him so bad, even now.

In their defense, Jet’s kids hadn’t known about his shrine. It was all he had left of his family. Jet had shared his food, his companionship, his skills, and his new home. He wanted to keep something for himself. But because of that secrecy, he hadn’t been able to sneak back into his forest home to retrieve his shrine. He wondered if it was still there.

Probably not.

“Did you make that?” he asked as the train neared their final station.

Jin nodded, running her thumb over the lip of the bowl. “I had some help.” she admitted. “One of the ladies is an earthbender. She’s not particularly strong, but she’s great with warm stones, needling, and massages.”
Li might have blushed and Jet nudged his boyfriend playfully.

“Is she now?” Jet teased.

Surprisingly, Li nudging Jet right back. Well, well.

Jin gave them a dry look but didn’t bother to hide the amusement dancing in her eyes. “Boys,” she groaned dramatically.

Li balked. “I didn’t do anything!”

Jin made a show of considering his words before shrugging. “True,” she admitted. “I suppose I’ll let you off this time.”

Pale gold eyes rolled as Li leaned back to rest his head against the train wall. Zenko snuffled and tucked her tails closer around her curled body, her chin resting comfortably in one of Li’s palms. It was adorable.

“Anyway,” Jin continued, “she helped me shape the bowl and the candle holders. I did everything else. I chose sand because I used to live by Full Moon Bay before moving to Ba Sing Se.” She sighed. “I was little then so I don’t remember much, but I remember the sand and the beach. I tucked a few of the shells I kept from that time in the sand for when I’m having a bad day. They always make me smile.”

Jet smiled fondly. “Yeah, I know the feeling.”

“You used to live by the beach?” she asked guilelessly.

Jet could feel his boyfriend’s gaze on him as he pondered his response to Jin’s innocent question. It was nonjudgmental and supportive and everything Jet needed.

“No,” he said softly, leaning over so he could rest his forearms on his knees. “I grew up in the forest by a river. Our town was destroyed by… Well, you know. After that, I lived in the treetops with my new family. I left to come here, but I remember the woods, the leaves blowing in the wind, and the dirt and bark between my feet.”

Odd. Talking about it still hurt like he knew it would, but he didn’t feel like crying anymore. He just felt empty. The place in his heart where his home, his family, his Freedom Fighters once occupied, was gone, ripped out of him.

But he wasn’t alone. He knew that now. He had Longshot and Smellerbee who had refused to abandon him and had even accepted some of the responsibility for his terrible, selfish act. He had a new, potentially interesting job as a spy and informant to Qiao. He had the tenuous trust of a Dai Li and made friends with Shanyuan, the Dai Li Apprentice.

And he had Li. Li the ex-potter turned tea server. Li the ex-Crown Prince of the Fire Nation. Li, his adorable, clever, and master swordsman of a boyfriend who was currently rubbing his back gently, comforting him.

Damn it. Jet had been doing great until now.


Lifting his head from his hands, Jet looked up at the girl incredulously. “Yeah. My Dad built the first part. But after he died, I kept adding onto it until the rest of my kids- er, my new family joined
me. Then I left.”

Jin just kept staring at him like he’d grown a third eye or something.

“You lived at the top of a tree?!” she repeated emphatically.

Jet stared right back with straight face. “Yes.”

Jin’s jaw dropped slowly until it formed a near perfect ‘o’ and Jet was beginning to feel a bit self-conscious.

“What?” he demanded.

“You…” Jin shook herself. “You see nothing wrong with that?”

“Nothing wrong with what?” Li asked, finally speaking up just as the train pulled into their station.

Jin’s stare shifted to Li. She blinked once, twice. Then she pointed at Jet and said, “You really see nothing wrong with that?”

Li hesitated, letting Zenko climb up onto his shoulder has he stood to disembark. “With what? The living in a tree thing?” he asked.

“Not living in a tree,” Jin said, huffing in frustration. “Living at the top of a tree. That doesn’t sound even remotely odd to you?”

This time, both Li and Jet shared a confused glance. Well, at least Jet wasn’t the only one completely at a loss here. Finally, Jet rolled his eyes and moved out of the train and into the train station. “Why don’t you explain what’s so ‘wrong,’” he said emphatically with air quotes, “about how and where I lived, hm?”

Jin just stopped walking, her forehead creased in deep thought as she considered the boys carefully. “You’re Earth,” she said bluntly. “But you lived in the treetops. Off the ground. Up high. Not touching dirt or rock. And you mean to tell me that never bothered you? Not in the slightest?”

Jet paused. Oh. Huh. He never thought about it that way before. He had just been trying to keep what was left of his parents’ memories close. Besides, living in the treetops had just made sense. People had a nasty tendency to not look up when hunting, it made it much easier to catch rainwater for drinking, and made food storage easier too. It wasn’t easy for chipmunk-squirrels to break into a box of nuts dangling from a tree limb, after all.

“Nope,” he said with a casual shrug, stuffing his hands in his pockets and continuing down the road towards Qiao’s place. “Can’t say it did.”

The rest of the walk was quiet. Mostly because Jin was too busy staring at Jet and Li was more interested in actually looking around. Right. Li hadn’t really seen the Upper Ring in daylight before. It could really caught someone who’d only know life in the Lower Ring off guard. The opulence was definitely over the top.

“There’s so much space up here,” Li murmured.

That too.

As they approached the looming walled complex, Jet slowed to a stop. Li continued a few steps more before noticing he was alone and turning back curiously.
“Li, don’t freak out,” Jet said, “but Katara’s in there.”

All the blood in Li’s face drained and his pale gold eyes widened. But he didn’t run or start panicking. Instead, he closed his eyes and bowed his head, breathing deeply. Jet let him calm down before speaking again.

“I asked her to come,” he explained. “She’s the best waterbender I know and we both know how badly Shanyuan needs the help.”

Li nodded weakly. “I know,” he said softly.

“Don’t worry,” Jin said suddenly. “If she wants to get to you, she’ll have to go through me. After I make her apologize.”

Some color was returning to Li’s face but that faint smile gave him life. Jet sighed. They’d be okay. Just because, he reached out, scooped Li’s hand in his, twined their fingers together, and pecked his boyfriend right on the lips. The resulting predictable blush was magnificent, the replying kiss was not predictable and very welcome.

“Idiot.”

Jet snickered. Li couldn’t even throw decent insults when he got flustered without it sounding totally unbelievable.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jet drawled, dragging his boyfriend to the front gate.

A knock, a call, a flash of his shiny, new messenger badge, and they were welcomed inside.

Li looked around at the Yan family’s complex in wonder. It really was nice in the daylight. He could make out details in the stone and woodwork that he’d missed last night. The central square of the compound was large and housed a koi fish pond, several stone lanterns, and a small, square tea room with three walls covered by thick, carved wood.

Li paused when one of the stone lanterns caught his attention. This one seemed slightly out of place in Ba Sing Se. In fact, unless Li was wrong, this particular pagoda lantern was of Fire Nation design. He filed that thought away for later and focused on following the servant to the living quarters.

Qiao stepped out onto of the doorway and nodded a greeting. “He’s resting,” she said. “As is the waterbender.”

Li breathed an internal sigh of relief. However much he might understand Katara’s actions towards him, he wasn’t ready to forgive her or face her directly just yet. He would much rather just check on his friend and then… deal with the other problem.

“Thank you,” he said, bowing shallowly. “Would it be alright if I see Shanyuan?”

“By all means,” Qiao said, gesturing inside.

Without waiting for them to follow, she turned and moved further into the interior of her home. Aside from the occasional servant, it was strangely quiet. Where were Qiao’s parents? Was she here alone? How unusual. Li wasn’t completely familiar with Earth Kingdom customs, especially
not the customs of the Upper Ring aristocracy of Ba Sing Se, but he doubted it was common practice for young Earth Kingdom ladies to go anywhere unaccompanied.

Then Qiao opened another door and Li forced his thoughts aside in favor of focusing his attention on Shanyuan. The young Dai Li was laid out on a futon with a thin, soft looking blanket draped over his body. His clothes had been carefully stripped away and folded leaving Shanyuan with only his white underclothes.

Tengfei sat between Shanyuan’s futon and the building’s stone wall. There were dark bags under his eyes and there was a pallor in his cheeks that was worrying. Nevertheless, the Dai Li’s green eyes were sharp and aware, if a bit tired.

Taking care not to rouse his friend, Li knelt on one of the pillows lining the futon and rested a palm on Shanyuan’s pale forehead. He had a fever. It wasn’t bad, but it could become bad if it wasn’t monitored closely. Fur brushed Li’s thigh as Zenko sat by his side.

“He wakes up every now and then,” Tengfei said, keeping his voice low. “He hasn’t called for his mother since dawn though.”

“She died, didn’t she,” Li said. It wasn’t a question and Tengfei didn’t answer. “Qiao,” he called softly, “please close the door.”

The young lady narrowed her eyes but did as Li requested, shutting and locking the door behind her. Jet moved to sit cross-legged to Li’s right while Jin took up a position by Tengfei’s side across from Li. Qiao, however, chose to sit primly just above Shanyuan’s head, her hands folded perfectly on her lap.

“You know what I am, Tengfei,” Li said, meeting the earthbender’s wise emerald eyes. “I promise, I will not harm him.”

The Dai Li stiffened, sitting up straight as his shoulders tensed noticeably. But while his eyes held reservations, Li knew that, with enough patience, Tengfei would allow Li to act. Sure enough, after a minute of consideration, Tengfei’s shoulders drooped in exhaustion and he nodded.

“I know you won’t,” the Dai Li said. “Perhaps that is what is so odd about this. I know who and what you are,” green met Li’s pale gold, “and yet I trust you not to harm him.”

Qiao cleared her throat. “It is considered common courtesy to keep the homeowner aware of the types of company they keep,” she said dryly.

Li sighed. “Just… don’t scream, okay? I want to check on him, not wake him.”

The noble woman frowned and eyed Li cautiously. She glanced at Jin who nodded.

“It’s alright,” Jin said. “Trust me.”

“Very well,” Qiao replied. “Proceed.”

Li ignored the exasperation groan from Jet next to him and instead focused his gaze and chi on Shanyuan. He wasn’t a healer and probably never would be as far as his bending was concerned. But he was beginning to learn that his Spiritual sensitivity came from a rather significant source. If he could sense problems in water just from his inner Fire’s desire to cleanse it, as well as the hair-raising presence of a Spirit nearby, then perhaps he could extend that ability into his bending itself.

Fire was life. Bending was moving the chi of the bender. Firebending was moving the chi of the
bender to start or take life. He would have to find and study a map of the human chakras later, but for now…

Extending his hands so they hovered over Shanyuan’s chest, Li breathed. In, hold, out. The warm glow of his chi-fueled fire encompassed his hands. Immediately, he heard sounds around him but they were muffled to his senses. All he could see and feel was Shanyuan.

Slowly, he moved his hands in circular motions over the young Dai Li’s body as close as he dared. He kept a strict control of the flames, refusing to allow them to catch, ignite, and burn the Dai Li’s clothes, skin, or hair. He wanted to feel not burn.

Reaching, feeling, he searched for that odd sense of disgust he’d come to associate with the presence of malice, corruption, or uncleanliness. He drew from his memory of the water in the well by Roulan’s healing clinic in the Lower Ring. It was distinct and Li would never miss that sensation.

The hairs on the back of his neck and arms rose and he knew Zenko was studying his movements and thoughts closely. If she could learn something from this, even if Li couldn’t find anything lingering on Shanyuan’s Spirit -please don’t be- then it was worth it. He had the brief sensation of one of Zenko’s tails brushing him and he almost smiled.

There wasn’t any malice that he could sense, but there was a… wrongness, for lack of a better word, settling in Shanyuan’s chest area. Perhaps that was the cause of the low fever. Li hesitated, his hands hovering over the area. He wasn’t a healer, but maybe…

Gently, he rested his hands on the thin sheet covering Shanyuan’s bandaged chest. The stripes of cloth were too thick to feel any individual abrasions through it, but the wrongness was still there. Minding his flame, Li pushed the warmth of his chi down through the bandages and into Shanyuan’s skin.

It wasn’t serious, thank Agni. All it took was a burst of heat and chi to aid Shanyuan’s natural fever and the wrongness would be gone. It would take some time, but Li dared not press. The young Dai Li’s health was still too delicate and Li was still too new at this to attempt anything more serious.

Leaning back, Li withdrew his hands and smothered his flames. “There’s a small infection in one of the cuts on his chest,” Li said quietly, clasping his hands and pressing them into his lap, aware of the wide-eyed stare he was receiving from Qiao. He would not be ashamed of who he was. Lifting his gaze to Tengfei, Li spoke. “I’ve given him some of my chi to help his body naturally fight it with his fever.”

“He has a fever?” Tengfei gasped, scooting closer and pressing the back of his hand to Shanyuan’s forehead and cheek.

“It isn’t very high,” Li said. “I only noticed because he’s warm to my touch right now.”

Tengfei looked at him oddly, his brow furrowed in puzzlement.

“What I can say with certainty is that there is no lingering affects from dealing with the Kuchisake-onna,” Li said, pushing passed his self-consciousness. “Just the small, natural infection and the low fever. I can’t do anything more than what I’ve already done. I’m sorry.”

Tengfei pressed his lips together grimly but nodded in thanks.

“…pretty bird…”
Surprised, Li looked down at Shanyuan who was still deep asleep. Shaking his head, Li cleared his throat. “I apologize if my presence offends you, Lady Yan,” he said politely, meeting the noble woman’s gaze evenly. “I give you my word, I will do you and yours no harm.”

The woman studied him closely over the light dark green sleeve of her dress for several seconds in silence. When she finally lowered her sleeve, her face was an impassive mask.

“Why should I trust your word, firebender?” she asked, her words carrying none of the usual edge or hatred. They were instead void of any noticeable emotion.

“Why do you have Fire Nation paraphernalia in your home, Lady Yan?” Li countered with the same level of passiveness.

Only the slight widening of her eyes revealed her surprise. Her recovery, however, was quick and flawless. She would be a perfect Earth Kingdom lady someday.

“There was not always war,” Qiao replied, her eyes refusing to glance at the Dai Li still sitting awake, aware, and paying close attention to her words. “There was once peace.”

“Why can’t there be peace again?” Li countered.

A perfectly painted eyebrow lifted in wry disbelief. “You think that’s possible?” she asked.

“Do you?”

Qiao held Li’s gaze, refusing to back down. “The Avatar visited my home earlier this morning. One of his companions mentioned you had a ‘fiery personality.’ I took it to be a metaphorical statement.” She tilted her head minutely. “I see now he meant it literally.”

Li’s heart quailed, hoping this wouldn’t ruin what he’d worked so hard for. He didn’t want to lose this camaraderie. He didn’t want to lose any of this if he could help it.

“Another one of the Avatar’s companions said you were nice,” Qiao continued. “Considering she was by far the most level headed of the bunch, I’m more inclined to believe her.”

Her. That must be Toph. Agni shine on that little earthbender.

“Besides,” Qiao said slowly, “whether I like it or not and whether you’re a firebender or not doesn’t matter.” She pressed her lips together as if fighting with herself. “I’m in your debt,” she admitted finally. “I’m Earth. We don’t forget debts. We take them seriously. I owe you. I will pay you back in full. It would be hard to do that if you’re dead or in prison.” She sniffed. “I hear prison is… distasteful.”

Li fought the urge to smirk. “It is,” he said simply. “I’ve been.”

Qiao just blinked. “I’m not surprised.”

Releasing his breath in a sigh of relief, Li allowed himself to smile. That went much better than he thought it would. But, unfortunately, Shanyuan wasn’t the only reason he came back here.

“Tengfei,” he said, “a word?”
Chapter Summary

In which Tengfei is seriously beginning to reconsider his sanity while his ability to be surprised seems to have increased. How unfortunate.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm so terribly sorry for the delay. My new job is time consuming and I often get back exhausted. This is the first weekend I've had where I feel refreshed enough to write and have the free time to write. Last weekend was my first weekend of mostly nothing and this is my first weekend with nothing to do. Thus, this update.

Azula is coming.

The insistent tugging at the back of his mind was testing Tengfei’s patience to the limit. He was loyal to Ba Sing Se. He was loyal to Long Feng. Never had those two loyalties been at odds before the events of the past few days. One had always been synonymous with the other. To be loyal to Ba Sing Se was to be loyal to the Grand Secretariat. To be loyal to the Grand Secretariat was to be loyal to Ba Sing Se.

How wrong that belief had been. In a way, Tengfei wished he didn’t know what he knew now. But on the other hand, he could only imagine how disastrous the events of the past few days would have been if he had given in to his initial loyalties and arrested Li for suspicion of firebending. The Kuchisake-onna murdered two Master Dai Li with ease and, from what he’d been able to gather, broken into Lake Laogai and promptly escaped. He wasn’t looking forward to reading the list of names on the deceased list from that.

“Tengfei.”

Shaking himself out of his dark thoughts, Tengfei regarded the young firebender in front of him. There were signs of exhaustion around the corners of Li’s eyes, but the young man held himself upright with his shoulders square. The only visible sign of discomfort was in the downturn of Li’s lips and the subtle twitch of his fingers.

The Knowledge Seeker had obviously elected to remain in the room with Shanyuan. That meant she was already aware of what Li wanted to say and likely how Tengfei was going to respond to it. He sent up a silent prayer to Yu Huang that this wouldn’t be too serious.

“What did you do?” he said firmly, crossing his arms and staring at the young man with a serious gaze.

Instantly, Li’s shoulders tensed and his gaze dropped. A moment later, they lifted and held Tengfei’s evenly. “I know you know my true name,” he said in a soft voice. “I also know every law you know demands you turn me in.”
True.

“But I also know that you vouched for me and went out of your way to protect me, despite your standing orders to do otherwise. And for that,” he pressed a fist into his open palm, the fingers of his open hand pressed together and held up in the Flame, and bowed deeply, “I humbly offer my gratitude.”

…well…

Startled speechless, Tengfei blinked and stared wide-eyed at the Fire Prince’s unexpected display. He was too sleep-deprived for this. Still, he folded his arms in front of him, tucking his hands into his sleeves, and bowed in return. His tired mind couldn’t find the right words to say in reply.

“I made a deal with a Spirit.”

He should probably get some shut-eye before heading back to report to-

Wait.

Tengfei froze mid-bow and began contemplating the meaning behind that simple sentence and how he should interpret it. He could only come up with one way.

Straightening, he took a slow, deliberate breath to keep his exhaustion-powered temper in check. “I beg your pardon?” he said, leveling a cool glare at Li.

To his credit, Li looked ready to bolt. Whatever willpower he managed to dredge up to keep him in place facing down Tengfei was probably due to the lack of available escape routes and hiding places more than anything else.

“Surely, I must have misheard you,” Tengfei said smoothly.

Li gulped and shook his head, stubbornly refusing to back down or wilt under Tengfei’s glare. “You didn’t,” he said.

Breathe. Think.

“Are you referring to the deal you had with the Kuchisake-onna?” he asked. “Because I’m certain,” he narrowed his eyes, “you don’t mean you made another deal,” Li finally began to wince, “with another Spirit. I’m sure I warned you of the dangers of that sort of thing. In fact,” Tengfei dropped his chin so the shadow of his conical hat fell over his eyes, “I’m certain your own personal experience with dangerous deals was enough of a warning.”

Li’s shoulders drooped but his face remained determined. Stubborn idiot.

“It was,” Li said grimly. “But…”

He pressed his lips together and let his gaze drift back to the closed door to Shanyuan’s room. With a sigh, he looked up at Tengfei once more.

“I did what was necessary. I won’t say ‘I had no choice’ because I did have a choice. I could do what my uncle wishes and fight against Ozai—” Tengfei’s gaze hardened at that hated name “—with the Avatar on the side of the Earth Kingdom and eventually take the throne as my position of Fire Prince dictates, banished though I may be.”

There was pain in Li’s pale gold eyes. Some of that pain, Tengfei could sympathize with. The rest
he could barely name.

“Or,” pale gold hardened to gleam embers, “I could reject my uncle, reject freedom and the Earth Kingdom and Ba Sing Se and Shanyuan and Jet and everyone and everything I’ve come to love and care for,” a slow burning anger have a hard edge to Li’s words, “and follow in Ozai’s footsteps as his loyal and obedient son. I could become Fire Lord by any means necessary and stop the war. After all,” Li lifted a single eyebrow and tucked his hands up his sleeves with a suspiciously passive expression, “there would be no need for war if there was no Earth Kingdom, no more Ba Sing Se.”

A cold chill began to crawl up Tengfei’s spine and a fear that threatened to bury him alive began gnawing at his heart. He wouldn’t dare. Li wouldn’t dare!

“Or,” Li continued, his expression crumbling away to reveal a lost child who has finally begun to see just how cold and cruel the world really was, “I could reject any path another has laid out for me and forge my own way.” He bowed his head. “I chose this one.” His eyes squeezed shut as if fighting back tears. “My… Uncle isn’t pleased with my choice. He kept trying to convince me that I’m wrong and his choice is best. But I refuse,” he hissed vehemently, "to be an ember in someone else’s fire unless I wish it!

Pale gold eyes locked with Tengfei’s own emerald green. “So I did what I felt I had to do to both convince my uncle that I would not be swayed and to request aid in what I plan to do in the future.” Li straightened his back and squared his shoulders. Although Tengfei noted how pale the visible knuckles of Li’s hands were. “I have to fulfill my deal with Wan Shi Tong. But I wasn’t sure how I could do that in the world as it is now. So I asked for aid from possibly the only Spirit who still has any true love for the Fire Nation and its people.”

Tengfei furrowed his brow in thought, running through a list of names of Spirits and trying to come up with one who wasn’t… No.

“I made a deal with Agni.”

Merciful Jade Emperor.

Struck speechless, Tengfei could only stare at the young firebender- the young boy in horror. A deal with a Spirit was bad enough. But a deal with a Great Spirit… No one Tengfei knew of personally, in history, or in legends ever dared to do something so inherently dangerous. A deal with a Spirit followed the person into death and even on into their next life. But a deal with a Great Spirit… Tengfei could only imagine the consequences of doing something so… so…

“Do you have any idea how stupid that is?” Tengfei demanded in disbelief. “The Spirits aren’t like us. They won’t let you off the hook. You’ve given over your entire life and all of your future lives to that Spirit with just a few words.”

“I know,” Li said calmly. One of his hands reached up to grasp at his throat, hesitating when the questing fingers found nothing and were forced to return to the shadow of his sleeve. “I know,” he repeated softly. “But I need help and I needed to know what I was doing, what I’d chosen to do was the right thing. I needed to know if it would help my people. So I asked Agni.”

A shudder danced through Li’s thin form. “You have no idea what it was like Tengfei,” he whispered, his eyes closed. “For a moment, a mere moment, I knew… everything. I understood eternity in all its complexity and it was killing me.” Li’s eyes opened and there was an age to them that didn’t match the appearance of the young man himself. “Agni offered me his support and gave me a task to do. It doesn’t conflict with my deal with Wan Shi Tong. Actually,” he added
thoughtfully, “I believe it will make fulfilling Wan Shi Tong’s deal easier.”

“What was it?” Tengfei asked. “The deal. What did you promise Agni in exchange for his help?”

Li shrugged. “My life, I suppose,” he said.

Tengfei choked.

“I’m already a child of Agni, as both a Fire Nation citizen and a firebender,” Li continued, either ignoring or completely unaware of the Dai Li’s mounting horror. “By giving him my life, I merely gave him what he already had. In exchange, he wants me to find the next Fire Lord and make sure they take the Dragon Throne.” Fire gleamed within molten gold eyes. “Both Agni and I have openly rejected Ozai as Fire Lord.”

Tengfei flinched.

“Ozai is Fire Lord in name only now,” Li said, his voice hard and uncompromising. “Agni’s blessing has been removed from him and given to another. It’s my job to find them.” His chin tilted down slightly. “If my suspicions are right, then I won’t be able to remain by their side for very long. As they are now, they would kill me as soon as look at me. But I won’t abandon them or betray them. They will become the new Fire Lord. And nothing,” a thin black eyebrow lifted in challenge, “and no one, will keep them from it. I’ll make sure of that.”

Sadness nipped at his heart as the grim meaning behind Li’s words began to settle in Tengfei’s soul. “So we will become enemies then?” he said in resignation.

But Li shook his head. “No,” he said firmly. “We will not. I said I would ensure the new Fire Lord took their rightful throne. I did not say I would help them win the war and conquer the world. Ba Sing Se is not my enemy. You,” he emphasized, “are not my enemy.”

Li sighed and his eyes sparkled pleadingly. “This war must end, Tengfei. It’s killing more than just people. It’s affecting the Spirits. Wan Shi Tong wishes the war to end. Agni demands it to end.”

“Nothing is that simple,” Tengfei said wearily.

“No,” Li agreed, letting his gaze drop. “Nothing is. But if I can find a place where those like you, like Shanyuan, and Jet, and Jin, and anyone who wishes to may live and learn in peace, then we might have a chance. People from all four nations will be welcomed to come, live, and learn. The War will be over and we can begin working on a peace.”

It was such an optimistic dream Tengfei almost didn’t believe it. Almost. Had anyone other than Li been the one to tell him such a dream, Tengfei would have thought them sun-struck. He snorted. Well, Li probably was sun-struck. Literally.

The reminder sobered him quickly. This was beyond him. He was just a Dai Li. His job was the protection of Ba Sing Se only. His jurisdiction ended at the Outer Wall. He loved this city and he would do anything to ensure its protection.

“I know who’s in the palace,” Li said quietly.

Reluctantly, Tengfei sighed. “I thought as much.”

“I want to talk to her.”

That was a surprise. Intrigued, Tengfei tilted his head. “May I ask why?”
Li grimaced. “Why do you think?”

He could think of a lot of reason actually. Most of then tended to end unpleasantly. Oh. Oh dear…

“You do then.”

Sweet Yu Huang, they were doomed.

“I don’t know what will happen after I leave,” Li said. “If all goes well, then she and I will leave and I will begin fulfilling my deals with Agni and Wan Shi Tong.”

“And if it doesn’t?” A much more likely scenario.

Li shrugged. “I die, I guess,” he said flippantly.

That is not something to be flippant about?!

“Although,” Li added after a moment of consideration, “I think it’s far more likely that she’ll capture me at this point. From what I can remember, killing me now would be pointless.”

That didn’t add up. “Why do you say that?” Tengfei asked. “I thought she already tried to kill you.”

“She did kill me, I think,” Li said. “Zuko died in that ghost town. I’ve been ‘Li’ ever since. I don’t think I can be Zuko as he once was anymore.” His form drooped wearily. “Despite how badly uncle and others wish me to be.”

As odd as it was, Tengfei was beginning to understand. “No one is ever unchanged,” he said. “Time waits for no one and will leave no one the same. You are wise to see that so young.”

Li snorted. “Wise,” he said dryly. “Zenko would tease me relentlessly if she ever heard that.”

“No doubt.”

They shared a tired smile of amusement before Tengfei was forced to return to the topic at hand.

“Azula,” he began grimly, “as long as she’s in the palace, she’s a threat to the Earth King. I’m certain the Grand Secretariat will do his best to keep her at bay, bu-”

“He’ll fail.”

“-t there’s only so much he can-” Startled, Tengfei blinked. “Beg your pardon?”

“The Grand Secretariat,” Li clarified. “He’ll fail. If he insists on making himself an obstacle, Azula will kill him.”

Incredulous, Tengfei balked at the idea. “She’s fourteen. Long Feng has seen many seasons of-”

“You don’t understand,” Li said, his voice cutting viciously through Tengfei’s words. “She will kill him. She might keep the Earth King alive if she decides she wants a toy or thinks he’d be a useful puppet. You and I both know the Earth King’s power is nigh on zero.”

True. Unfortunately.

“That means the Grand Secretariat is the only real obstacle between my sister and the Earth King’s throne,” Li continued. “She’ll use him until he’s outlived his purpose, then kill him. She never tolerates being wasteful. Everything she says and does is carefully calculated. Never too much,
never too little.” His smiled wryly. “Ozai taught her well.”

That was a disturbing truth Tengfei had always known but never actually realized until now. He had only ever heard stories of the Fire Nation royalty. Ozai was the distant, faceless monster whose looming shadow threatened the people of and spiritual sanctuary that was Ba Sing Se. Crown Prince Zuko was the faceless elder son whom Tengfei, Long Feng, and every Dai Li in the city believed would follow in his footsteps. And Azula was the lesser known youngest daughter of the Fire Lord. She might be Fire, but she was never considered a real threat.

Until now. Damn.

How many long-held beliefs had Tengfei watched crumble beneath the unstoppable blundering of Li and his Knowledge Seeker? More than Tengfei alone could count. But if there was one thing Tengfei could still find comfort in, it was the surety that Li was not lying. Jet was right. The boy wore his every thought and emotion on his face for all to see.

It was either the undeniable truth, or a masterful disguise. Tengfei sincerely hoped it was the first. Because if it was the latter, then what he was about to do would haunt him for the rest of his no-doubt short life.

“If I can get you inside the palace,” Tengfei said, studying the surprise on Li’s face, “do you think you could get Azula out of my city?”

Li bit his lip. Finally, he sighed. “Possibly. It won’t be easy and,” he rolled his shoulders self-consciously, “it won’t be comfortable either.”

His gaze turned to Shanyuan’s room and Tengfei watched those pale gold eyes he had long ago learned to fear and despise melt with sadness.

“What?”

Li asked, glancing at him. “Because I believe you are watching your apprentice heal, am I correct?”

Ah. “No,” Tengfei agreed slowly. “No, I suppose I wouldn’t be.”

Li nodded. “Then if you can get me over, heh or under, the palace walls,” he grinned wryly, “then I’ll do my part. Then you come right back here and you stay here. The Dai Li owe Qiao a debt and Qiao owes me. I’ll ask her to shelter and vouch for you. That will settle that. Do we have a deal?”

Tengfei hummed. “And what of your uncle? If the Dai Li discover your true identity, they will find out your uncle is the Dragon of the West and they will not be merciful in dealing with him.” Old man or no. “The general’s crimes against this city are too great and Earth is very good at holding grudges.”

Li nodded. “I give you my word that the moment uncle learns what I’ve done, he will flee the city.”

“Good. And Jet?”
Li’s face froze in shock. Clearly, he had been hoping to avoid that topic.

“An blind person could see the bond you two share,” Tengfei continued, watching Li blush and look away. “Are you so quick to abandon him?”

“I’m not abandoning him,” Li said sharply, before sighing and letting his shoulders droop. “I’m not abandoning him,” he whispered. “The Avatar is still here in the city, right?”

“I’m not sure actually,” Tengfei admitted. “I believe so.”

Li reached up to grasp his throat, clawed at air, then ended up biting his thumb. “If I go alone, I know Jet will follow me and make a fool out of himself,” he said in fond annoyance.

“He’d probably do more than that,” Tengfei said.

Li nodded in agreement, still nibbling his thumbnail nervously. Then he stopped. “Jet is an official messenger of Qiao’s,” he said suddenly.

Tengfei blinked. “I wasn’t aware. When did that happen?”

“The morning, I believe,” Li said, a sparkle of amusement in his eye. “She got Jin as well.”

Damn, that girl worked fast. She had talent.

“I might be able to use that,” Li murmured. Louder, he asked, “Have you ever heard of ‘the darkest day in Fire Nation history’?”

The Dai Li frowned and tilted his head. “No, I haven’t. Why?”

“Because whatever that is was important enough for the Avatar to lie to Wan Shi Tong and then steal from him,” Li said darkly. “Professor Zei didn’t give me many details but- Uh. Are you okay?”

“Zei?” Tengfei gasped, thunderstruck.

“You know him?” Li asked, brightening.

“In a way, yes,” Tengfei said carefully.

Li hesitated, studying the Dai Li’s expression, then frowned. “He’s dead. I’m sorry.”

Ah. “May I ask when?”

“When the Avatar left Wan Shi Tong’s library,” Li replied. “The professor decided to stay there. He died. Now he lives in the library.”

Um… “You know,” Tengfei said, picking his words, “most people don’t ‘live’ after they die.”

“They do when they become Spirits,” Li said.

“Become a-” Some many thoughts raced through his head that Tengfei couldn’t even begin to figure out what to say or if he should say anything. Most of it was curses and denials anyway. And yes, that was definitely a smirk on Li’s face. The scoundrel.

“I’m sure you want to alert the Grand Secretariat of your whereabouts,” Li said, as if he hadn’t just buried Tengfei’s mind in impossibilities come true. “I doubt anyone would consider it too odd if
you sent someone who’s both an official messenger as well as an informant for the Dai Li to do that job. Jet’s position as a messenger of Qiao’s family would lessen any doubt that you’re here.”

“It would be unusual,” Tengfei admitted, "but not necessarily unheard of. Though typically, we deal with our own only.”

“Except,” Li said sharply, “when your apprentice is recovering from near fatal wounds and you are recovering from dealing with the Kuchisake-onna, arresting the person responsible for her creation, and protecting your apprentice. The woman sheltering you offered her messenger for your use. If something were to happen to that messenger in the meantime, well,” Li shrugged, “things happen.”

“Why are you trying to help me?” Tengfei asked after a moment.

“Because you aren’t my enemy,” Li said. “I hope that you’re my friend.”

Before Tengfei could respond to that, Li spoke once more. “My… Than and Ying…”

Ah, yes. “Nothing will come of them. You have my word.”

Li relaxed, slumping in relief. “I’m hoping I’ll be able to speak to my sister then get out of there and out of Ba Sing Se. But if my luck is as bad as usual,” he shrugged, “then I want them to know I didn’t leave them deliberately.”

:If it is that bad,: a familiar voice said moments before a gray-black blur bounded up into Li’s arms, tails swishing, :then I believe everyone in Ba Sing Se will be aware of Azula’s presence.: 

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Tengfei muttered.

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